

Transfiguration Sunday 2021
Sermon 2.14.21

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Mark 9:2-9

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one^[a] on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^[b] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved;^[c] listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (294)

We Goodmans watch the *Muppet Christmas Carol* every Christmas season. This is the Muppet version of Charles Dicken's literary classic, and it features all the greats. Kermit the Frog is Bob Cratchet, Miss Piggy is his wife, Robin (Kermit's tiny nephew) is Tiny Tim. Gonzo plays Charles Dickens, who serves not only as author but also narrator. Rizzo the Rat plays his sidekick and thus a stand-in for the audience. Gonzo tells Rizzo his story, and thus tells us—this while they get on each other's nerves.

The Muppets often get on each other's nerves. It's why I love them. It's why they make such brilliant children's entertainment. Thick relationships make for a lot of love and a fairly steady stream of irritation. Muppets know this. Kids know this, or will come to know it eventually if they've got it good in the world.

Gonzo, for those less in the Muppet club, is a creature of indeterminate sort. A blue-furred, hook-nosed, craggily voiced lover of chickens, Gonzo is one of a kind. He's bold, but sweet, making him the perfect mediator for this story, which (you'll remember) has its spooky parts, and which would likely (this version of it anyway) have some little ones in its audience. Gonzo, and

Rizzo alongside, help us through, facing the ghosts of Marley and Marley, and the ghosts of Christmas past and Christmas present. This blue monster and snacking rat walk the knife's edge between spooky and goofy like few others could—they themselves and the ghosts they help us endure.

With the final ghost, though, even they've had enough. Just before the ghost of Christmases to come arrives on the scene—a shape-shifting, faceless presence who brings Scrooge to his own grave, cold, forgotten—Gonzo's out. He promises to meet us at the end, but the getting there is more than he can take. He and Rizzo, both: gone.

Now Scrooge is on his own.

As for us? I love this part of the film because it leaves that question for us to answer. It gives permission to those in the audience for whom this might also be too much, to take a break and come back when the happy ending we're anticipating has come.

And come it does.

Likewise, when Scrooge wakes up in the morning, in his own bed, though everything else about him changed, Gonzo and Rizzo are there.

"We're back!" says Gonzo to the camera, which is to speak to us.

"We promised we would be," says Rizzo, also to the camera.

But who could blame them for bailing? The going was rough for a while there.

The going is about to get rough for a while here—for six weeks, to be exact.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. The last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, it always precedes Ash Wednesday. It always pivots us into Lent, the six-week season of penitence and preparation.

What we're preparing for, of course, is the cross.

Epiphany, as you might know, can be long or short, can be as few as four weeks and as many as nine. It all depends on when Easter is, and this depends on when the first full moon after the vernal equinox is. Since Christmas is always on the same date, and Lent is always six-weeks long, and Easter is always on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the equinox, liturgical time is a mixture of fixed and fluctuating time scales. Epiphany is a season that can expand, or contract, as needed. An accordion in time, Epiphany this year was relatively short—just six weeks, as Easter is relatively early.

This is to say that, if you're surprised Lent is already upon us, rest assured you're not alone. I was surprised too.

This story is also the pivot-point in the gospel—in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) but more to the point for us today, in this synoptic gospel, Mark. Falling at the exact center of the story, the Transfiguration has it that everything of Jesus' life and ministry prior to it has been a gearing up. Jesus gathering disciples, him getting a name for himself and appealing to crowds and dispersing of the demonic and the diseased and the unclean, his arrival and presence and movement throughout the region have been an arrival and presence and movement and growth of the reign of God. Everything following now would be much more focused, directed to Jerusalem, directed to the cross. Suddenly, since just a few verses prior to this, the reign of blessing and good news we'd come to sense as manifest in Jesus would take on a new quality. It would take on the cross.

The disciples would have none of it. Peter especially, he would have none of it. Emblematic of all of them, though, emblematic all of *us*, Peter, in his response, might be everyone who would follow Jesus, everyone who would recognize in Jesus God's good will and creative power and immediate presence. Everyone loved him! Everyone sought him out! So, "God forbid it, Lord. Handed over to the authorities? Made to suffer? Made to die? This must never happen to you!" Why would such a one need to suffer the cross?

This is remembered in a scene just prior to where we find ourselves now, on the top of a high mountain where Jesus would be transformed, dazzling white, and joined by Moses and Elijah.

These two are, of course, emblems themselves. Representing the Law and the Prophets, these two, Moses and Elijah, personify these concepts.

The Law, the Torah, that long ago gift through Moses to the people, had forever given the people their shape and form. A document of constitution, here was the way by which the people were constituted as a people.

As for the Prophets, these breathed into the Law its living spirit, its conscience. These reminded the people what good the Law should serve. Truly, if the Law offered the people order and a means for justice, then the Prophets offered what said justice should actually look like, what good this new order should actually serve. For the poor, mercy and provision; for the orphan, hope; for the widow, protection and connection: the Law and the Prophets made for an original

foundation worth conserving and building upon for a glorious and good future, to a glorious and good end.

The alpha and the omega: conserving and progressing. A bridge from the past to the future, a bridge sound on both ends.

That Jesus, then, was seen as in conversation with these concepts, in the same light as these figures, indeed *transfigured* among them, suggests a continuity that runs deep while also an addition that presents new hope: the Law, the Prophets, and now the Christ. Now, those folded into God's dream for love, community, and justice would extend beyond this original people, would extend to the furthest reaches of the creation, would concern all people, all life for all time. A once-tribal calling—to the Israelites! to the Judeans!—would encompass all the world—to the Gentiles as well. As the prophet Isaiah said, “You have multiplied the nation! You have increased its joy! The salvation of the Lord shall extend to the ends of the earth!”

This was the aim. And here was the means, the way: self-giving love. Christ would embody self-giving, that is, sacrificial love.

It's been said that the season of Lent begins with the end (glory) and ends with the means (crucifixion, self-giving love.)

It's been said that the season of Lent begins with the Christ we want and ends with the Christ we get, and, incidentally, the Christ we need.

Only a suffering God can help.

“God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you.”

This likely explains the booths Peter is remembered to have suggested. This moment of glory, this moment of theophany, a divine revealing for this small and special audience, just Peter and James and John, set apart, by themselves: “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Because, at this point, they knew, sort of anyway. They knew where Jesus was headed. They knew where they'd need to follow, should they find it in themselves to continue to follow. Already Jesus had spoken of it once, and soon he would speak of it again and then again. So, maybe they figured they could short-circuit the journey. Maybe they figured they could skip to the end, to the glory part. It had broken in, here, a moment of eschaton breaking into history, a moment of the great and glorious end interrupting the on-

going-ness of time. So let's grab it. Let's keep it. Why go back to time when we can dwell here, amidst eternity?

Incidentally, this is how it worked for Elijah. When the prophet's life and work were complete, and it was time for his disciple Elisha to take up his mantle, Elijah didn't die, he was simply and gloriously taken up, in a chariot of fire. That's how the story goes anyway, a by-passing of death, bound straight for glory, all while Elisha watched. So, if for him (Elijah), why not for Jesus? If for them (Elijah and Elisha), why not also for them, Jesus and Peter and James and John?

These booths are a funny touch, if you ask me. There's a tradition in Judaism that makes ritual use of booths, or tents, or tabernacles. Succoth, a harvest festival, it comes in late summer and it makes ritual use of succahs, booths. But nothing Peter says about these dwellings suggests he has in mind the Festival of Booths.

I think what he was after here was something far less lofty—something more like setting up house, maybe even playing house. When winter was upon us, back in November, I went through a sort of playing house myself. The days were getting shorter, the weather was getting worse, and COVID was on the rise: it was grim, and I was suddenly seized by a need to buy rugs and lamps.

I prowled Facebook Marketplace, and arranged for barterers, pickups, and shipping.

The boys learned to avoid me in the house, because they knew every time I'd approach it was to ask their help in moving furniture for laying down rugs.

I moved lamp tables here and there, and plugged in lamps here and there. Where would light best be shed? Where are the dark corners or the cold, noisy floors best brought to light or covered up and softened?

And I sort of just watched myself, work through this fever, for a month or so waking early each morning to get to it again, falling asleep at night exhausted for the amusing mania of it.

I posted about it on Facebook, that my plan, apparently, for making it through quarantine winter was to buy all of the rugs and all of the lamps; and several friends commented that they, apparently, had a similar plan, but theirs involved duvet covers, towels, sheet sets, or pots and pans. Jenny, apparently, had acquired so much furniture that Susan was making her get rid of some.

The booths are a funny touch, so random and out of the blue. The narrative voice even seems a little embarrassed for Peter. Peter blurted this out, the narrative voice tells us, "because he

didn't know what to say, so terrified were they." It has me believe Peter actually suggested this. When the going feels like it might get rough, some of us will, please, play house, make our eternal dwelling with God as manifest in this realm. And I got some really good bargains to boot!

It's a familiar urge, but it won't do, not for long.

This, I'd guess, is why God made a point not only of identifying once again who Jesus is, "This is my Son, the Beloved," but also of insisting, "Listen to him."

Remember, the voice of God on this mountain top said out of the cloud as has now become a pattern, the familiar from Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved." God adds to it now this, an underscoring, a correction: "Listen to him."

What they were to hear was word of the cross.

What these disciples were to hear was the thing just prior to this scene that Jesus is remembered to have said, and the thing just to follow this scene that Jesus is remembered to say, that the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.

Listen to him. Listen to this—because only a suffering God can help.

That's Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said this. German preacher and theologian, victim of the Nazis, killed in one of their death camps, he claimed it: "Only a suffering God can help." Otherwise, you've just got gods who replay all that's wrong with the world, its many toils and snares. Might making right, triumph bringing with it the snares of defeat and humiliation and resentment and revenge, we don't need another hero. We need someone who is going to take on the fighting, its destructive power; take on this sin, which pervades and doesn't let up; take it into himself, and offer back forgiveness. We don't need another hero, to take up a glorious fight where he, and so we, will win. We need a savior, someone to save us from all the fighting, to save us from the sin of this apparently zero-sum game.

And seeing this is hard. Seeing the need for a God who will plumb the depths of human cruelty and suffering, of human destruction and desolation, is hard. Seeing the God who will plumb the depths all the way to hell in order that hell might be hallowed, and all might be God, is hard. We would so prefer a hero. We would so prefer someone who'd just triumph, and make us triumph, a god who would bless our ambition and bless our success. Forget that, when there are winners, there are also losers. Forget that, when someone triumphs, someone else is humiliated.

No doubt, we'd be among the triumphant, so what do we care? No doubt we wouldn't be the ones humiliated, so what concern is this of ours?

These are the gods of the world that Paul wrote of in his second letter to the Corinthians, this church of people who so often wanted to be dazzled more than they wanted to suffer. The church in Corinth, a bustling mix of every sort of person set in a bustling port town where everyone in the world seemed to pass through: they wanted dazzlement more even than they wanted to enter into mutual service (because that's a drag). These are the gods who kept them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who, though crucified, is the image of God; who, *in* crucified, is the image of God.

And it's fine to want that. It's human to want that, to be Gonzo sometimes when the going gets rough, to be Peter playing house when what's outside really sucks. All this is *fine*! It's human. It even makes sense. Notice, please, that nowhere in the story of the Transfiguration is Peter made to feel shame at his really quite sweet impulse. So, it's fine! It's just not right. It's not *good*. This we know because Peter, though not shamed, is revealed as someone to whom we should not listen, not when it's in direct contradiction to what Christ has said.

The cross. We are headed toward the cross.

So, today, we glimpse what lies beyond. As with the vaccine now rolling out, even if slowly, we glimpse how this will end, how it will end well. But we're not there yet. We still have road to travel that will be dark and cold, that will come with risk and require of us mutual care. This is the way of the world, this which can feel sometimes like little more than a valley of the shadow of death. But we can see. Today, we can see where it's headed so why we endure, why even we endure together.

I wake up early in the morning. This you might know about me. Lately, I've been waking up not to pitch darkness but to dawning light.

It's happening. Rest assured, and rise to hope, it's happening.

Thanks be to God.