

**Transfiguration Sermon at Circle of Mercy, Feb 26, 2017:
“Bodies of Light”
Matthew 17:1-9**

Before I read the Scripture, let’s get our bearings.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, which, in the Protestant tradition, is the last Sunday in Epiphany. After today, it’s seven weeks til Easter.

And in between today and Easter, beginning Wednesday, lie the 40 days and 6 Sundays of Lent.

In Epiphany we heard, “Arise, shine, your light has come!” and “You are the light of the world.” In Lent we’ll hear, “you are dust, you’re returning to dust.” In Lent we go down. We descend into shadow.

Think of the Grand Canyon. On one rim is Transfiguration Sunday and the season of Light. On the other is Easter and the season of Resurrection. In between is Lent, the canyon between the two high places.

And on both sides of Lent, on both rims, are stories of something extraordinary happening to Jesus’s body.

Matthew 17:1-9

Here’s the question I have for you tonight: What if . . . this story is true?

What we just heard -- Jesus became so luminous that his face “shone like the sun,” and the garments he wore “became white as light” – what if that really happened?

What if this story isn’t just an early Christian writer exercising poetic license to make a theological statement -- connecting Jesus with Moses, who went up on a mountain, spent time with God, and came back down with his face shining? What if this story isn’t just metaphorically true? What if it’s telling us something that really happened? That Jesus the human being was so filled with the Spirit of God, so affected by it, that

something incredible happened with his body, and it began giving off light?

The first time I ever had this thought, the moment it first occurred to me, as an adult, that this story could be true, I was at Ingles. In Swannanoa.

It was a Friday night, three years ago. I'd been out of town for a few days and was on the way home. We needed food for supper. I pushed the cart around a corner and there, six or eight aisles over, was a friend I'd not seen in a few years. Our kids had gone to school together, and we used to see each other at school functions, but now we never ran into each other. Yet there he was.

And he was glowing. I don't know how to describe it to you. I've seen people before that I would call radiant. But this was different. He was beyond radiant. He was radiating. There was light pouring out of him.

And I didn't fall to ground afraid, but it stopped me and got my attention.

We went up to each other, did that handshake-hug guys, made a little small talk. And then I said – I just couldn't help it, I had to know -- "Robert, I've got to ask you something. What's happening with you? There's this . . . I don't know how to say it . . . There's this light coming out of you."

And he said, "Have you heard I had cancer?"

"No, I hadn't."

"Yeah, I did. I got to where I lost my voice. I just stopped being able to talk. So I went to the doctor. They did some tests. And I had cancer in my throat. But they treated it. It took about six months. But now it's gone. I went back for more tests last week, and then Wednesday I saw the doctor, and it's all gone. And I can talk again. And man, I'm just so happy."

We talked on – two or three more times he said, “I’m just so happy” – and then we parted.

So I got in the checkout line, and there was this huge feeling in my chest, like my heart was swollen or something. And I wouldn’t call it fear, but I was on alert. You know how you get real still and alert when you hear something, and you’re not sure what it was, and you’re trying to figure it out?

And then the thought popped in my mind, “The Transfiguration was real. If Robert’s over there doing it in the frozen food section, I’m thinking Jesus might have, too.”

So, in the span of about 10 minutes, in the grocery store, a lot got rearranged for me. I started believing something about Jesus. And about all people. That a man named Jesus and a man named Robert and a woman named _____ and a woman named _____ and a man named _____ can be so animated by, so connected to, so charged by, so powered by –

By what? By the Holy Spirit? the Life Force? by Light? So permeated, so saturated, so *incarnate* with a vibrating, resonating, shimmering Presence that their bodies are changed and their energy is different and sometimes you can feel it in them, and sometimes you can actually see it.

Now, just because I believe it, that doesn’t make it true. But what if it is?

Well, IF it’s true, THEN . . .

First, our connection to light might be a lot more significant and substantial than we tend to be aware of.

The world is full of light, this we know. Scripture says it: God is Light. The very first thing God made was light. And light is everywhere, even in darkness.

Science tells us some of the same. Everything gives off light. We can’t see most of it. The portion of the light spectrum humans can see – we can

see red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet – we can't see infrared and ultraviolet and several other forms of light -- the percentage of the entire light spectrum that's visible to us is less than 1/100th of a percent. (0.0035%)

Remember the Anthony Doerr novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*? It's a lot. There's 30,000 times more light we cannot see than light we can.

Everything gives off light. Trees. Stones. The French Broad River. The chair you're sitting on. The floor your feet are resting upon. A basketball, a book, a bird.

And people. People produce light. Most of it is infrared and not visible to us. But our bodies off very small amounts of visible light, too, all the time. The amount fluctuates over the course of a day. For most people, it's at its lowest at 10 in the morning, and at its highest at 4 in the afternoon.

The part of our body that gives off the most visible light? Our face.

And think about this. Your body is taking in light every time you eat. Every grain of wheat, every stalk of broccoli, every Granny Smith apple – it grew by soaking up light. And if you eat meat, the animal you eat grew by eating the plant that light grew.

Here's Wendell Berry's short poem, called "Prayer after Eating":

I have taken in the light
that quickened eye and leaf.
May my brain be bright with praise
of what I eat, in the brief blaze
of motion and of thought.
May I be worthy of my meat.

A guy I know that works at Warren Wilson says, every time he looks at a field of cows, he says he sees a bunch of four-legged solar panels, converting the energy of sunlight into food.

The energy of light, in every bite.

I'm talking here about the light that's everywhere, at all times, in all things, in you. And inviting you to pay just a teensy bit more attention to it. It sounds a little wrong to call it this, but I'm talking about paying attention to *ordinary* light.

Mary Oliver says, "Attention is the beginning of devotion." Giving attention to the ordinary helps us recognize how extraordinary the ordinary actually is.

But what about the extra-extra-ordinary? What about Transfiguration? What if there are people or moments so clearly on fire with light that you don't have to be paying attention, or practicing mindfulness, or reading poetry, to notice. What if there are inbreakings of Light so extra-extraordinary that a neurotic accomplice to murder like Saul could be blinded by it, or a knucklehead pushing a shopping card around a grocery store could see it?

If that's true, it's not just that our connection to light is more considerable than we tend to notice. If Transfiguration is real, if light can take over like that, it means the window between heaven and earth is open a lot wider than we realize, and it changes our orientation to the substance and structure of reality. It changes our posture towards possibility. It means our cause for hope is justified.

The world is a dark place. It's a rough place. We see it with our own eyes. We hear about it on the news. We feel it in our bones. There's a disturbance in the force. The curtain of Temple has been rent in two. Lo the hosts of evil round us. And within us. We don't have to wait til Lent. Even in Epiphany, we feel the darkness.

But the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And sometimes the Light shines so strong and so close to people that they shine, too. And while it's truly unpredictable when Light might take over a person's body like that, it might be the case that it happens most often in people like Jesus and Robert, who have gone down into that canyon that is the valley of the shadow of death. Or it might be that God is just crazy madly in love with all of us, and by and large tries not to

overwhelm us by gushing about us, but once in a while She just can't contain Herself, She's just so pleased She can't help it, and before you know it, somebody's glowing.

There's a famous passage from Thomas Merton that speaks to what I'm trying to say:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will.

This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.”

And now we come to another consideration. What if the person the Light draws close to is you? What if it's not someone else? What if the luminous one is you?

I'm not talking about the way our ego says, Oh, I want to shine, I want to be important, I want to do something special, I want the recognition or the power that comes with that.

I'm talking about times when the Light becomes strong in you and you can feel it, literally, in your body. You can feel energy radiating in your heart, your face, your hands, your throat. Have you learned how to offer space for that, how to allow it and let it make use of you? Are you familiar with the reflex sometimes to clench around it, or constrict it, or block it? Are you able, sometimes, just to soften and let it happen *in* you, and then *through* you?

I'm talking about, What if YOU are Mary, and the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and asks you to bear the Light for a while? Have you learned the

sensations and motions of willingness, and how to support willingness in yourself? Sometimes I wonder how many young women God approached, how many years it took, before God found one who said back, "Let it be with me according to your word."

A few weeks ago, I was going crazy. The details aren't important to tell. We're all in a situation, right? You're in a situation, I'm in a situation. We all have our drama of the moment. But I was exhausted, my body was in this near-constant state of semi-panic, and I felt really close to just falling apart.

In the midst of that, I got together with a couple of my soul-friends, and I was telling them about this. And at some moment, there was a pause, and one of them, Dave, looked at me and said, "I just want to tell you – and I feel uncomfortable doing this, but – I feel my heart opening towards you right now, and I want to tell you that I love you."

And then there was a longer pause, while I took in his words, and the light from his face, and the vibration of his voice, and the energy of his heart. And I felt my body change and, within two minutes, for the first time in weeks, my body came to rest.

But think about it. If you were Dave in that moment, and you felt the energy of Love and Light arise in you, would you have been able to allow it? Would you have received it, and welcomed it, and allowed yourself to channel it?

I'm wondering if you'd be willing to try something with me.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says "I am the Light of the world." And in Matthew, Jesus says, "You are the Light of the world."

Would you be willing to spend just a few moments noticing the presence and energy of light around you and within you?

It's totally optional, but if you're interested, I'll invite you, first . . . to direct your attention to one of the walls opposite you . . . then to the center of the circle . . . then to book-reading distance . . . and then inside.

Eyes closed or eyes open, either is fine. Whatever feels best to you right now.

And with your attention inside, making no effort at all to change anything, just allowing what is, notice the energy in your body. Your heart beating, maybe. Perhaps your breath. Sensations in your feet, or hands, or face, or belly. A humming, a vibration, a temperature, an impulse to move. A tensing or a relaxing. There is no need to make any of this happen. Just notice whatever is there. Notice from your heart.

And whatever energy you're noticing, wherever in your body you're noticing it – notice also the radiance of it. Notice how it spreads and extends. Or doesn't. Perhaps the energy you're noticing is still gathering itself, and is not ready to extend.

Again, you're not making this happen. Whatever is happening in you is something you're receiving.

And imagine what you're receiving is coming from the Source of All Light.

And now notice if the radiance in you is extending beyond you. And if it is, maybe allow that. Let it extend in any direction, to the persons near you.

And notice if any radiance from others is coming to you.

There is a holy place,
Beyond politics and religion,
Beyond sickness and health,
A place beyond my way is better than your way,
A place where perfection is not possible, and not required.
A place made of Light,
A people made of Light.
A Circle of Mercy.
We rest in that place right now.

[Silence.]

Chime