

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 23, 2020 (Last Epiphany, Year A)

I don't know about you, but as a kid, *The Wizard of Oz* totally creeped me out. I think I was forced to watch it by some babysitter when I was way too young, and the whole wicked witch thing and the flying monkeys gave me nightmares for years.

This may be why my favorite part of the entire movie actually has nothing to do with tin men or cowardly lions or even *good* witches. It was when Dorothy woke up from her dream and everything returned to normal. You remember that scene, right? Auntie Em is there comforting Dorothy, and all the people in her life – her family and friends, who were the characters in her dream – crowd around her. Toto jumps up on the bed. And Dorothy continues her mantra, “There’s no place like home.”

I think about that scene as Jesus heads down the mountain with Peter, James, and John in the aftermath of that miraculous moment of transfiguration. Suddenly everything returns to normal. We move from the transcendent to the ordinary; from the luminous to the everyday; from Technicolor to black and white. That was literally the technique used in the 1939 film where everything that happened in Oz was filmed in color while everything in Kansas at the beginning and the end of the movie was filmed in black and white. In that final scene when the dream – or for me, the nightmare – is finally over, everything returns to the way it was. And that’s how I imagine it felt to Peter, James, and John as they walked back down the mountain with Jesus.

I mean, what happened up there was kind of scary! Not in a Wicked Witch of the West kind of way, but it was certainly unsettling. And at one level the story of the transfiguration reads like a film script that makes liberal use of Hollywood special effects. Their friend Jesus’ appearance is transformed before their very eyes. His face shines like the sun, his clothes become dazzling white, two long-dead prophets appear, and the voice of God comes booming out of the sky. The disciples are naturally confused by all of this and we hear that “they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.” So at the same time that Jesus is transfigured in glory; the disciples are disfigured by fear. And then just as suddenly, everything returns to normal; the film reverts to black and white.

But you can’t just experience the miraculous and then get back to everyday life as if nothing happened. A divine encounter changes everything. And that’s what this was. The three disciples caught a glimpse of Jesus’ resurrection glory; they are offered a rare, this-side-of-heaven window into the very divinity of Jesus. That’s what these “special effects” are all about. And Peter, James, and John are forever changed by the encounter. Just as Dorothy’s outlook on life and home has been forever changed by her dream, the disciples are transformed by their experience. When you’ve had a life changing experience – that’s precisely the point. Your life irrevocably changes.

Now, we hear the story of the transfiguration, this literal mountaintop experience, every year on the last Sunday before Lent. But as it’s a bit confusing, both for the three disciples and for us, I’d like to just take a moment to talk about what exactly is going on here. Jesus has led these three up a mountain. Not that Jesus plays favorites, exactly, but Peter, James, and John have a

privileged role, like an inner circle of discipleship. In addition to this experience, it's these three who are with Jesus when he raises Jairus' daughter from the dead and prays in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he's crucified. They are special witnesses to the ministry of Jesus in all of its divinity and humanity. They've seen him do the miraculous; they've seen him experience the miraculous; and they've seen him at his most achingly vulnerable, praying before his arrest and crucifixion.

So, while it makes sense that Jesus would take Peter, James, and John with him on this arduous trek up the mountain, at first glance the figures they encounter offer much less clarity. The disciples look up to see Jesus chatting with Moses and Elijah, two long-dead prophets of old. If Jesus' glowing face wasn't disconcerting enough, seeing these two heroes of the faith must have been terrifying. Which may be why Peter starts babbling about building three dwellings.

But there's significance here. These weren't random choices. The presence of Moses, the great Hebrew prophet and Law-giver and Elijah, a prophetic leader of the Hebrew people, point to Jesus' own role in salvation history. As God's son, he is the revealer and fulfiller of the Law of Moses. And he is also one specially chosen to speak truth in the face of oppression; one who reveals the will of God for all people, especially those living under the yoke of injustice.

So, to transfigure is also to reveal. Through this moment of transfiguration, Jesus' true identity as God's son is revealed; Jesus' message of bringing hope and salvation to all people is revealed; Jesus' mission to lift up the least and the lost is revealed. And not just revealed but given God's divine stamp of approval. *That's* what's happening, albeit in dramatic fashion, up on that holy mountain.

One of the details I love about this story is how, after the disciples are overcome with fear, and cowering on the ground, Jesus comes over to them, touches them, and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." When the excitement is over and everything returns to normal, when the disciples return to Kansas, Jesus reaches out and touches his friends. It is such a gentle, compassionate, loving gesture. One easily skipped over in the afterglow of what the disciples have just witnessed and what we have just heard.

But that's the thing about this faith of ours. The smallest and most compassionate acts coexist with the greatest glory. Transfiguration and touch. A simple act of tenderness paired with a glimpse of the resurrection.

Like those of us preparing to enter the wilderness of Lent, the disciples are about to enter their own wilderness. A time when they will be separated from Jesus by his death. This glimpse of resurrection glory will see them through this dark time, offering them an olive branch of hope through the flood of darkness and despair. And while we know the end of the story, I encourage you to hold on to the image of the transfigured Jesus up on that holy mountain as we prepare to walk the way of the cross. Let it shine in your soul as we anticipate and wait for the glory of Easter. Be aware of Jesus' loving touch on your heart. Allow it to help you survive whatever troubles you may encounter in the wilderness of this mortal life.

And then hold on to those vibrant colors of resurrection glory when everything returns to normal. There's comfort in normal; there really is no place like home. But let the dream of God's love for you live on, even as we place all our hope in the coming resurrection of Jesus Christ.