

## **What is this “Transfiguration?”**

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston  
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In three days we will be observing Ash Wednesday, and that means we are concluding the Season of Epiphany today. The Day of the Epiphany, as always, was January 6, which, this year, happened to be a Sunday. This is the fifth Sunday we have been in the Epiphany Season. I cannot resist reminding you of an adult education opportunity that begins next Sunday, February 10. During Lent I will be leading a Bible Study on the Minor Prophets, and you are invited to be a part of that study.

“Epiphany” means appearance or manifestation. The focus is on the appearance of the Lord God Almighty in Jesus who reveals the Light of the Lord to this world. So the image and figure of light is a pervasive theme in the Season of Epiphany. Jesus is the Light of the World, not just for some, but for all.

That symbol of light was quite important as we celebrated the Day of the Epiphany on January 6, for the Wise Men were led by a star as they searched for and found the newborn King, laid in a manger in Bethlehem. On January 13, the Gospel reading for the day centered on the Baptism of Jesus at which time the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and a voice from heaven said, “This my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16). That’s important, because the same basic statement is made two more times in Matthew, and those reiterations tie together the whole earthly ministry of Jesus. Those statements remind us of who Jesus is and what his purpose was.

Today is one of those reiterations, and light is also a very important element in this experience. The words read earlier stated that “his face shown like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matt. 17:2). Instead of the brightness of a star, the light comes through Jesus. Our attention is directed not up there, but right here. Again, the voice spoke and said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Matt. 17:5). Midway through his ministry, Jesus is confirmed as the Son of God, the One who does the will of the Father.

Lent begins on Wednesday, and at its conclusion we will come to that day we call Good Friday. The witness of the Bible, particularly in Matthew since that is the Gospel we are now reading, echoes the same words through the voice of a Roman Centurion, a Roman Officer. This soldier standing at the foot of the cross as Jesus dies says, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Matt. 27:54). The Gospel of Matthew does not want us to miss the main point. In the midst of healings, teachings, feedings, travels, and struggles, there is an overarching theme: this One is God’s Son. Today, we are in the middle of the earthly ministry of Jesus, and on the mountain top Jesus receives and three disciples witness this moment of affirmation. Voice and light are integral to the Transfiguration to reassure us of who Jesus is and that what he does conforms to God’s will. Listen to him!

This unusual event is truly an epiphany for the disciples – a revelation. That does not imply that they understood, for we know how James and John wanted a guarantee of important places after Jesus kicked the Romans out and how Peter denied Jesus three times while Jesus' trial was taking place. Those are the same three that were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. But the Transfiguration was a moment that they retained in their memory to remind them of Jesus' identity and ministry. In time, they did understand and proclaim, "He is the Light of the World." Through him, we know a God of compassion, mercy, justice, and love. He has shown us the heart of God, and it is a heart of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Are you with me? Are you placing the Transfiguration into the total ministry of Jesus to grasp more firmly how this one event ties into the very beginning and ending of his ministry? Are you more convinced of the consistency of the Gospel's proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God?

That is a challenge. When you and I walk into the doors of this church building on this Sunday or any Sunday, we bring with us lots of stuff – not material stuff, but cares, worries, and burdens. How can we climb the mountain with Jesus to see the Light more clearly when our hearts and minds are weighed down? It's not just those things personal to us: concerns of family, marriage, employment, children, parents, death, money, addictions, and health. It's also the feeling that the world is coming apart at the seams: the growing violence and anarchy in Kenya, just one more concern to add to our list that includes Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Darfur, Congo, Colombia, Gaza, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, in addition to a seven billion loss at a French Bank, billion dollar losses among the financial institutions of our own country, the meltdown in the sub prime mortgage market. Among some there is a deep feeling of desperation and depression.

Just last week, I read an article illustrating how some broke homeowners set fire to their abandoned houses, an act called a weapon of the angry, vengeful, distressed, and dispossessed. Arson is a growing problem in the wake of the collapse of the sub prime market and the trap many feel they are in. How can such folks see the Light on the Mount of Transfiguration?

Another indication, reflected in a Washington Post article, stated that suicides among active-duty soldiers last year reached their highest level since the Army began keeping such records in 1980. The number of attempted suicides or self-inflicted injuries in the Army has jumped six fold since the Iraq war began. Heavy burdens drive some people to make war on themselves. How difficult to look to the Light. Desperation causes some to take very desperate measures to escape the traps they feel they are in.

Life is full of darkness and shadows, so how can we keep our eyes on the light on the top of the mountain to see the transfigured Jesus, the Son of God?

The Light that comes from Christ Jesus can shine into all the valleys of life and living. The strength of that Light is greater than all the crevices of despair, deceit, and

destruction rampant today. We need each other to help us keep our focus on the Light; the fellowship of the faithful remains for me an essential grounding in my life.

When the Good News Bible was first published, I remember reading a verse from Psalm 16 that has stuck with me ever since, because it spoke to me. It reads, “How excellent are the Lord’s faithful people; my greatest desire is to be with them” (Ps. 16:3). We need each other to point the way, to repeat the Word, to offer comfort, encouragement, and hope so that the Light can shine through.

Traditionally, the Good Friday worship of the Church ends in darkness simulating the death and burial of Jesus, with only the lighted Christ Candle standing before the worshippers. Then the Christ Candle is removed, and taken up the aisle out of sight. In total darkness, the congregation dares to declare, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again...” At that point the lighted Christ Candle returns and is placed in front of the congregation. His Light shines in the darkness. In the midst of all my struggles and those of the world, the Light of Christ still offers hope, confidence, and power to all who place their trust in him – in him alone! Just like with Peter, James, and John, everything does not come clear all of a sudden. Faith requires us to engage in a struggle to understand and obey. As hesitant as we sometimes are and not as humble as we should be, we yet offer to Christ Jesus, the Light, our alleluias, and in his name we mutter our prayers and petitions to The Almighty who has promised to hear us.

The Transfiguration is such a peculiar event. When we put it in the context of the whole experience of Jesus from birth to death to life again, the singular event of the Transfiguration proclaims the One, sent by the Father, to lead us by his Light to the grace, mercy, justice, and compassion of the Almighty. Praise to you, O Christ, our Light and our salvation. Amen.