

“Only The Thinnest Veil”

Rev. David Gregory

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Transfiguration



Through the Veil
Daniel Mirante

Readings

Rev. M. Barclay

in the online resource *Liturgy That Matters: Spiritual Nourishment for Collective Liberation*.

The veil between the heavens and the earth is so thin. It is but a perspective. A recognition. A pause. A pulling-back. A clarity, and yet also a confusion. We cannot control when or how or through what means the “Kingdom” and its strange ways are revealed to us. But with each encounter, we are invited to remember how close the dreams of God dwell. How intimately eternity abides. Though we do not always perceive it, the hopes of ancestors past and the dreams of generations future are always with us. In letting go, in accepting that disruption has its place, in opening ourselves to the chaos of the unexpected, we are transformed in the care of the Sacred.

Mark 9:2-9

from the New Revised Standard Version

Six 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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

At one time or another, many of us have had the experience of a new set of eyeglasses. When the optician hands them to you and asks you read the chart with the updated lenses, there’s this moment of recognition that you haven’t been seeing as clearly as you might. And now you walk out into a world that may be quite familiar, but now it’s sharper, clearer, and more focused.

It was two or three years ago that I was introduced to an innovative online community known as “Enfleshed,” which is a group of younger theologians and preachers, mostly millennials, with a queer feminist and non-binary perspective. My impression of their work is that they provide a fresh take on what we used to call “liberation theology,” but they give us a new set of eyeglasses with which to see. It’s a sharp, clear, provocative, sometimes biting commentary on patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, and injustice of every kind. In theological terms, they leave me feeling old, a bit dusty, and for a gay man, surprisingly out of touch. So I became a weekly subscriber to their Lectionary-based library called, “Liturgy That Matters: Spiritual Nourishment for Collective Liberation.” A couple of years and a pandemic later, I feel like it’s given me a tune-up.

While I’m grateful for my own theological training, most of it happened more than forty years ago, with some later course work about sixteen years ago. But in many ways, the world that I studied so carefully in the past no longer exists, and the application of theology to this new world is a different kind of animal. Let me just say that I’m happy to have a new set of lenses, and for the sharp focus of younger generations who are keeping us on our toes, rejecting our unintended duplicities, and calling us out on our resistance to change.

This is the last Sunday of the Epiphany season this year, meaning that next Sunday begins the season of “lengthening light,” otherwise known as Lent. Today has long been called “Transfiguration Sunday,” commemorating an experience Jesus shared with the inner circle of his inner circle: Peter, James, and John. It was a moment designed to take these three friends for whom he had a growing trust and deep affection, and allow them to see a side of things that not everyone could see. He gave them an experience of a new set of lenses, so to speak. Whatever it was that they saw or heard or touched, it sharpened their perspective in such a way that they were never the same; they saw a different world.

There is a poem from my childhood that goes something like: “Grandpa dropped his glasses once into a pot of dye, and when he put them on again he saw a purple sky.” So much of what we see depends upon the lenses through which we are looking. M. Barclay’s view of the Transfiguration is that it represents one of the “thin places”—one of the major events or experiences in daily life when the veil between the heavens and the earth is less of a barrier than usual. Think of those twilight moments as we move between sleeping and one of those sublime moments on a hiking trail when we discover a panoramic view. There are times of deep meditation or prayer from which we emerge with a higher vibration. There are instances of experiencing or creating poetry, music, or visual arts that leave us feeling transported in ways that are wholly unexpected.

These things happen, I believe, when we’ve suspended conscious thought long enough for our souls to be reset. It is why meditation is so vitally important, especially now. If we don’t find a thin place now and then, we eventually build up a resistance that keeps us walled off, or perhaps boiling in a stew of anxiety, frustration, or worry. According to Barclay, this thin veil to which we tune ourselves in meditation is a recognition, a pause, a pulling back, a riding of a fine line between clarity and confusion. In these encounters we remember how close the dreams of God dwell, or how close divine energy is to us. The thin places become thresholds in us, conjoining the hopes of our ancestors and the dreams of future generations. They invite us into the chaos of the unexpected, which in the present moment is our place of transformation. In other words, they can be a little scary, but if you breathe your way through them, they can change your life.

A couple of weeks ago I hiked a trail that took me up quite a bit higher than I usually go. You must understand that I am not a person who enjoys heights. I have gone up to the observation deck at Rockefeller Center, and ended up feeling my way along the wall that leads to the down escalator. When people jump out of airplanes on TV, I feel physically ill. When I was in my twenties, I drove up Pike's Peak and prayed that God would get me down again, and if God did somehow get me down, I promised I would never go up there again. And I haven't. So recently when I climbed a hill and discovered an amazing view of the Bay, at first I went "Oh wow, is that gorgeous!" And on my exhale, I was saying, "Get me down from here." But something interesting happened this time. I decided to breathe—deeply—down into my diaphragm. Slowly, deeply breathing, one foot in front of another.; little by little, step by step. I will admit to you that I was a little out-of-body, but quickly regained my ability to be present, and with energy flowing up and down my spine, I was able to lift my gaze and fully appreciate the beauty of what I was seeing. What had been anxiety was changed into exhilaration; what I had feared became something I could safely experience. It was a transfiguration of sorts, an opportunity to be on that line of clarity and confusion, love and fear, maintaining control and letting go, and (as Barclay says) "in accepting that disruption has its place, in opening ourselves to the chaos of the unexpected, we are transformed in the care of the Sacred." All of this is to say that I still will never jump out of an airplane.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, as we anticipate the season of Lengthening, the sun growing higher in the sky each day, carrying us to Equinox and finally to the brightness of Solstice, we can experience the kind of energy that will birth something new in us, in our society, in our world. We will see with new lenses, and the sharper focus will set us free.



The Transfiguration
James Tissot