



February 27, 2022: Transfiguration Sunday

Faces Down the Mountain

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

O Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; Take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.”

I'm not going to preach on Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians this morning, but I do have a brief commentary before I speak about the Gospel.

You may notice Paul casting aspersions on Moses and on the people of Israel, for their unwillingness to see Christ as the Lord. He refers to “the veil” over the minds. We want to remember that Paul considered himself a good Jew who followed Jesus, and that these criticisms are part of an intra-family feud, one that non-Jews may not participate in. There is no place in our Christian theology for anti-Semitism.

This morning we come to the last Sunday of a long Epiphany season, during which the Gospel of Luke has been our primary guide. Epiphany began back on January 6, when the Wise Ones—the Magi—visited the manger to celebrate the birth of the newborn baby. (The manger that we have set up here comes down after worship today. Thank you, Altar Guild.)

Each week of the season there has been an epiphany, an “aha, addressing the question of who this Jesus is: the vulnerable baby visited by these faithful foreigners: the beloved baptized One; the purveyor of wine at a joyful wedding feast; the brave preacher giving his first sermon in his home town; the sage advisor to fishermen on the sea; the challenging teacher on the level place.

This morning, he is the transfigured One, shining in glory, joined by Moses and Elijah, representatives of the Law and the Prophets. The arc of Epiphany begins with new birth, ends with a shining face.

I have in my office a framed page from an issue of *Life* magazine from about 30 years ago. It is a page with 16 different faces of Jesus. Each face of Jesus comes from a different culture: Korean, Russian, West African, African American, Filipino, Native American, European American, and so forth. There is even a female Christ. I had it on display in the Upper Parish Hall at one point a few years back.

Each face captures the reality that God in Christ comes to us in the particulars of every race and nation. Though the first Jesus came to us as a Palestinian Jew, God in Christ continues to come to us in the face of every person we meet every day.

Faces are what we present to the world. They've been covered with masks most of the last two years.

But in their natural state, faces both cover and reveal. We take some care with our faces. We try to control what they reveal. We may put on make-up. Or surgically alter them. We shave them. Or let the hair grow. It's what people notice first about us. Faces give clues about who we are. They are probably the



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main reason that we have mirrors. While body language and cues are important, it is our faces that make the first impression on, and connection with, the world. The importance of eye contact and visual connection make “face time” more meaningful and significant than a phone call, letter or email, for example. In the last couple of years, we have Zoomed constantly, so we can see each other’s faces. After a while, we learned how to put up still photographs of ourselves, or some other scene, when we tired of showing our real faces, or when we wanted to eat or fold our laundry.

Recently, we’ve been reminded on the national stage about the importance of visual representation, of particular faces, in places of power. The nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, criticized by some as radical left-wing identity politics and lauded by others as shaping the Supreme Court into one that “looks more like America.” I believe her nomination highlights the significance not primarily of *appearances*, but of *faces who represent actual experiences* that some, large groups of people, in this case Black women, have had, that other groups have not. It appears also, by the way, that Judge Jackson is a woman of significant Christian faith.

In the Gospel story this morning, the appearance of Jesus’ face changes. Luke doesn’t say how it changes, exactly. But Matthew’s Gospel, in a slightly different telling of the same story, says that Jesus’ face shone “like the sun.” And there is the voice: “This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him.” You recall the Voice—it is the same Voice who says to Jesus, ‘You are my son, the Beloved, in whom I am well-pleased.’”

After this experience, Peter, James, and John, go back down the mountain in the presence of Jesus, speechless, to face the messiness of life. Right away in the second part of the Gospel reading, we are reminded of how hard it is to be faithful, down the mountain, where life is messy. We see Jesus frustrated, out of love, with his disciples.

But I also imagine Jesus gazing on his disciples, his face still alight, on fire from the inside, radiating some kind of inner light.

The challenge of the disciples, and us, is to practice seeing one another in the same way *with* this same light, *in* this same light.

The Franciscan Richard Rohr writes that,

We need to look at Jesus until we can see the world with his eyes. In Jesus Christ, God’s own broad, deep, and all-inclusive worldview is made available to us. Christ is the light that allows people to see things in their fullness. The precise and intended effect of such a light is to see Christ everywhere else. In fact, that is my only definition of a true Christian. A mature Christian sees Christ in everything and everyone else. That is a definition that will never fail you, always demand more of you, and give you no reasons to fight, exclude, or reject anyone.

(<https://cac.org/seeing-christ-everywhere-2019-02-13>)



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I bet each of us can imagine a face where we find it difficult to see the face of Christ. Maybe it's a face that has expressed anger and hatred toward us or those we love. Or jealousy. Or indifference. Or a face that makes us feel shame. Or maybe it's a face that calls out our own callousness to suffering. Or our fear of the "other," or our desire for power and control. I wonder how Russians and Ukrainians, are seeing each other now.

In these moments, imagine the face of Christ gazing on us with love and delight, giving us the light by which to see others.

We want to stay on the mountaintop where God does the work for us.

But our life is down the mountain. We live with the light that God has given us, the light that God continues to give us through the Holy Spirit in prayer, in Scripture, and especially through the help of one another.

We continue to practice seeing the face of Christ in one another, seeing as Christ sees, with compassion and love.

Amen.