

“You will do well to be attentive to this,” Peter writes, “as to a lamp shining in a dark place.”

What exactly did those disciples see on Mount Tabor? Orthodox mystics since the 14th c. have taught that what the disciples saw was Uncreated Light – what they call "Tabor Light." This light is more than simply brightness or illumination. The Uncreated Light of God is the creating, purifying, illuminating and deifying *energy* of God.

That same light, for the Orthodox, shone through Jesus and dissolved the boundaries between eternal timelessness and created time to reveal Moses and Elijah. As a cloud hovered over the mountain, the disciples were terrified by the same light that blinded Paul on the road to Damascus.

Roman Catholics have tended toward interpreting what the disciples saw as the radiance of heaven. Consequently, Roman Catholic congregations around the world today will be reflecting on the Transfiguration as they focus on the end of Christian life.

Anglicans, of course, braid strands of both these perspectives. And these are expressed beautifully in the hymn that we just sang. The hymn is based on a 15th c. form of the Mass called the Sarum Rite that was prevalent throughout England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland until it was abandoned in the Protestant Reformation.

After the Reformation, the mid-19th c. Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement in the Church of England revived many of the ritual enhancements and practices associated with the Sarum ritual. And most of those have been preserved for us in the Book of Common Prayer and in our hymnal.

One Anglican priest, Fr. John Mason Neal, was intensely affected by the Oxford Movement. He co-founded an organization still working for the reunion of the Orthodox Churches and the Anglican Communion. He also wrote or translated several of our hymns. His feast day is tomorrow because Fr. Neale died on the Feast of the Transfiguration in 1866, the feast for which he translated the words of the hymn that we just sang.

Anglo-Catholics like Fr. Neal are irresistibly drawn to beauty. And so it is especially appropriate for us to look at the Transfiguration through the lens of music and art. For us, the ultimate worship experience is one that offers a glimpse and a taste of the beauty and mystery of God. That's why we use

beautiful fabrics in our vestments, adorn the church with icons, build churches with intentional architecture and burn the purest incense we can find. Offering natural beauty is the purpose for burning real beeswax candles, and blessing good wine and bread baked with milk and honey. Beauty is the motivation behind our chanting and our singing, and why we tend to prefer Bach, Mozart and Schubert to Christian contemporary or pop music.

All of this is intended to express or to expose us to God's beauty.

It is ironic that, among all the scriptural references to beauty as a window onto the Divine, stories about the Transfiguration are both the most compelling and the most overlooked. Ironic, but not surprising, really, because none of the English translations of this passage refer directly to beauty.

Except hidden in one word.

Our readings from Peter and Luke both use the word twice: "Glory." Now, we tend to think of "glory" as honor and fame. But in Peter and Luke's Greek, the word signifies something more, something beyond, like radiance, magnificence and splendor.

Or beauty.

In 1982, the Swiss theologian and Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar, wrote a dense, seven-volume work titled "The Glory of the Lord." In that series, von Balthasar proposed that the word "glory," the word used to describe the splendor that radiated from Jesus at the Transfiguration, was a reference to nothing less than the beauty of God.

What Peter, John and James saw on that mountain was God's beauty.

Sounding like a good Anglo-Catholic, von Balthasar insisted that the essential starting point for the human encounter with the Divine is a moment of aesthetic perception, a glimpse of radiant beauty and meaning in a work of art or in the natural world. He believed that beauty was our clearest path to seeing and experiencing God.

"Before the beautiful," von Balthasar wrote, "no, not really *before* but *within* the beautiful – the whole person quivers. He not only 'finds' the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it."

What Peter, John and James saw was God's beauty. And that's why some of our elders in the faith contended that the Transfiguration changed the *disciples*, not Jesus. Standing *within* God's glory, within the beauty of God, their perspective widened and deepened until they could behold, for just a little while, Jesus Christ as he truly was.

Jesus did not change in that moment. The Transfiguration changed the consciousness of the apostles. Their awareness was momentarily capable of physically seeing the resplendent, eternal light of God's beauty. The miracle is not what happened to Jesus but what happened to his disciples. They were allowed to see what Jesus always and already was in both his human and his Divine nature.

And Jesus not only granted them a sight of *his* truest, fullest self, he also showed them *their own*.

You and I are invited to similar, if less immediate, sightings of the Divine light. Not just spiritually, but with the eyes in our head. And in order to be allowed this vision, we have to participate in the Divine light – to be quivering within it until we are transfigured by it to a greater or lesser degree.

"You will do well," Peter writes as a witness to that beauty, "to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place."

Now, you and I both know that *most*, but not all, Episcopalians agree with our emphasis on liturgical beauty. There are also other ways of being Christian in the world and some of them are suspicious of our images and practices, especially some of the ways we engage our physical senses in worship. Many folks – Christians and unchurched – wonder why we spend so much time, energy and resources creating experiences of God's beauty when so much remains to be done for the people with live with, the communities we live in and the planet we live on. It's a reasonable question.

Here's my answer.

We could relax and wait for the glory of God to come someday as God's heaven in all its unveiled splendor. It surely will. But waiting misses God's revelations showing up here and now, in the incarnation of God's beauty in creation. What Jesus showed the disciples on Mount Tabor was that his flesh was the form that God gave him and that God had made that form *one* with the Divine. So too does God make our flesh one with the Divine.

Jesus Christ is unique, but not exclusively so. You and I are also unique, just like everyone else. *His* uniqueness, Jesus' uniqueness, is the image, a sighting, of the One in whom we all will find our own God-given, eternal and unique identity.

In the collect for the Feast of the Transfiguration, we pray to be "delivered from the disquietude of this world" so that we may gaze upon the transfigured Jesus. Just for a moment. That's all Peter was asking for – a temporary tent where he could absorb God's beauty just for a moment.

Just so: we don't remain here for long. But our desire to linger here like Peter, James and John in a thin spot where we can refresh our souls is understandable. We spend a precious hour gathered with Christ in a cloud that bridges time and eternity; an oasis of beauty where the voice that confirmed the unique identity of Jesus Christ also confirms our own.

And then, moved by the Holy Spirit spoken from God and illuminated by the vision of God's on-going work of transfiguring creation, we go back down the mountain to our daily lives to radiate for others that which is good and true and beautiful.

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