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# **The Face of Christ**

**Luke 9:28-36**

**A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel, February 10, 2013**

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The 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church sits in the middle of downtown Birmingham, Alabama. During the heart of the Civil Rights movement, when Birmingham was known across the nation as “Bombingham,” marchers and protesters would assemble at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, then walk across the street to Kelly Ingram Park, where they demonstrated against segregated public facilities and the exclusion of black men and women from local businesses. The church served as organizational headquarters for political protests in the city and a symbol of the movement for justice and equality. It also became a target of whites in Birmingham who resisted such efforts.

Many of you will know the story of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church – it is among the most infamous of the Civil Rights movement. In September 1963, Birmingham faced a federal court order to admit the first black students to three different public schools. It was a tense and hostile time. Sunday, September 15, was Youth Day at the church, when children planned and led morning worship. Four young black girls, dressed in dazzling white, left their Sunday school class to head downstairs to the basement to prepare for their role in the service. At 10:22am there was a sound like thunder, and the whole building trembled. A bomber had tunneled under the church basement and placed 19 sticks of dynamite under what turned out to be the girls’ restroom. The bomb detonated, and the rear wall of the church crumbled. Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson all died under the collapsed building. Denise was 11 years old. Addie Mae, Cynthia, and Carole were 14.

In the weeks after the bombing, the nation mourned the loss of these young women and grasped for meaning in the midst of tragedy. Some took the bombing as a sign that no one was safe. Insurance companies in Birmingham began canceling commercial policies on black-owned businesses. Civil Rights leaders asked the federal government to send in troops to restore order. For others, the bombing was impetus for new efforts at racial reconciliation. Among the 8,000

mourners at the girls' funeral were 800 Birmingham clergy, black and white, making it "many times over the largest interracial gathering of clergy in the city's history."<sup>1</sup>

As mourners looked for a symbol of the senseless violence, many focused on a broken stained glass window in the church. It was the only window to survive the bombing – an image of Christ on the east wall. Only something was missing. With most of the panes in tact, the bomb had blown straight through the face of Christ. Where there was once the face of Jesus, the blast left only a gaping hole. You can see an image of the window after the blast on the front cover of today's bulletin.

As I reflected this week on the meaning of the transfiguration text before us today, I wrestled with Luke's words alongside the missing face of Christ in this image. Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray, and while he is praying, Luke says, "the appearance of his face changes." (NRSV) In the words of an older translation, "the fashion of his countenance was altered." (KJB) What has happened to the face of Christ? The transfiguration is a moment that announces Jesus as the Son of God, the Chosen One. He reflects the glory of God and his whole body radiates dazzling light. Moses and Elijah appear, affirming his place among the prophets and confirming his intimate relationship with the Father. Along with his strange appearance comes a cryptic conversation. Jesus discusses his "departure," that is, the gruesome trial and death that await him in Jerusalem. The transfiguration pulls back the curtain, so that we see the true nature of the glory of God. We see in this scene that God's glory is in Christ, who empties himself for us. God's holiness is in Christ, who takes away our sin. God's beauty is in Christ, who hangs, naked, on the cross. When we think of God's glory in these terms, the broken window in that Birmingham church begins to look more and more like the transfigured Jesus.

Why does the face of Christ change? Because we shatter it like a broken window. We bring to God our destructiveness, our prejudice, our hatred, and our ignorance. We bring to God everything in our lives that is not glorious, that is not beautiful, that is not dazzling white. We bring to God our endless pride, and our explosive anger. Just when we expect God to break us, the Son of God is broken instead. The brokenness of the world shatters the face of Christ. But look again at the window. Light shines through those jagged edges. The face of Christ, while empty, is full of glorious light.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 892. The funeral was for three of the girls. One family elected to have a private funeral.

The thing about faces is that you have to get up close and personal to see them. If we look very closely, in fact, we can trace the whole life and ministry of Jesus just by watching his face. The very face of God looks with favor upon Mary, and she becomes great with child. John the Baptist lowers Jesus into the Jordan River, water washing over his face. After forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, the face of Christ is gaunt and thin from hunger and wrestling with the devil. When the crowds are hungry, he takes five loaves and two fish, turns his face upward and looks to heaven, breaks them, blesses them, and all are fed. A rich man approaches Jesus, asks for the way of eternal life. His eyes soften. He looks on the man with love, and tells him to sell what he owns. Again, he turns his face upward, this time looking not to the heavens, but into a tree: “Zacchaeus, come down from there. I’m coming to your house today.” Tears stain his cheeks as he mourns the death of his friend, Lazarus, and again as he weeps over Jerusalem. On another mountain on another dark night, he prays again to God, this time with anguish on his face and sweat dripping from his brow like blood. “Father, not my will, but yours be done.” His cheek, wet with a kiss of betrayal from Judas. His face is pierced by a crown of thorns and writing in pain. He exhales, and breathes his last. His eyes close. His face drops.

Tears, sweat, celebration, pain, anguish. Love. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is the eternal one, unchanging, everlasting to everlasting. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Yet when we look into the face of God, it shifts, and it changes.

Why does the face of Christ change? Because the very essence of God’s unchanging love is willingness to change for love of us. In the incarnation God’s holy, perfect love stoops low in the fragile humanity of Jesus Christ. See in the flesh of his face the evidence that God will take any form, endure any trial, bear any burden to be with you. It’s like the character in the novel who asks Jesus, “Does that mean that all roads will lead to you?” “What it means,” Jesus answers, “is that I will travel any road to find you.”<sup>2</sup>

When he gazes on this transfigured Christ, Peter says, “It is good to be here! Let us build a dwelling place!” In other words, this is the place where God lives – nail it down and all will make pilgrimage here. When people want to be in the presence of God, they will come to this place. Peter’s impulse is our impulse, too. We catch a glimpse of glory and we want to make it

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<sup>2</sup> Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack*, 182. A sermon from Rev. Dr. James Howell directed me to this passage. <http://www.mpumc.org/uploads/documents/sermons/2010%2003%20March%2014-%20James.pdf>

permanent. We will come here to see the face of Jesus, to look upon the light of God's glory. When we need God, we will know exactly where to find God.

In 2006 the US Department of the Interior officially designated the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church as a National Historic Landmark. Each year, over 200,000 people visit the church. They make a pilgrimage to see for themselves the cruel history and enduring hope of Birmingham. Perhaps you have been one of those pilgrims. This window with the missing face of Christ was moved across the street to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, a museum with archives, galleries, and spaces for study and reflection, which opened in 1992. This week I spoke with several students who said, "I've been there. I've seen that window." It is crucially important to preserve these moments of history, and to tell the truth about our past, our present, and our future as a nation. These are events that we cannot afford to forget. But we must remember that no tent or dwelling space that we build can contain God's holy movement. Not a landmark, nor a museum. Not even a Chapel as grand and wonderful as this one. You may have heard it said that we tried to nail down God once and for all on the cross, but not even those nails could hold God down.

Why does the face of Christ change? Because God is at work in the world, meeting us in the faces of strangers and friends, enemies and companions. Every face we see is the face of Christ, inviting us into deeper relationship with God and with our neighbor. They may be faces of hospitality and welcome, or faces of challenge and prophetic warning. They may be faces of joy and celebration, or faces of pain and anguish. When you look into the face of another, do you see a beloved child of God? Do you see one for whom Jesus gives his very life? In whom have you seen the face of Christ? Who has seen the face of Christ in you?

I have said quite a bit about the transfigured face of Jesus. It is worth remembering that institutions, buildings, and organizations have faces, too, and those faces change. You may have noticed that Chapel Music looks a little younger this morning. To the students and staff of KidzNotes in Durham, how grateful we are that you are here. Your gifts of music have transformed our worship, and we see the beauty and richness of the face of Christ in you.

The face of Duke University has also changed, over time. Many of you will know that this year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first black undergraduate students matriculating at Duke. Five students – Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke, Mary Mitchell Harris, Gene Kendall, Cassandra Smith Rush, and Nathaniel White, Jr. – arrived in September 1963, just days before the bombing in Birmingham. Duke was one of the last major universities to desegregate. UNC admitted black

undergraduates eight years earlier, in 1955. The day those five students arrived on campus, they found no black faculty, no black administrators, and no black trustees. Wallace Wade had an entrance and seating section designated “colored.”<sup>3</sup> No black man or woman had ever been invited to stand in this very pulpit to preach the liberating word of God.<sup>4</sup> The face of Duke University was white, and the faces of the students at Duke were white. Until those faces changed.

This week has brought much controversy about race, culture, and the faces of Duke University. A party on campus used offensive images, language, and costumes, and students of all races have reacted with protests and calls for greater sensitivity. Again we find ourselves in the national media. In these times of hurt and frustration, we would do well to remember the strides Duke has made over the last 50 years. We can all rejoice in the courage and bravery of those first five black undergraduates. We can and should celebrate the ways Duke has changed. But we cannot stop there. We must also acknowledge the parts of Duke that remain broken. We must acknowledge the aspects of our lives that fail to reflect the light of Christ in the world. What prejudices and sins need to break in you, in order for God’s face to shine through your face? What cruelties and wrongs need to break in all of us?

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. It begins the season of Lent, a time of penance and preparation as we await the anguish and glory of Holy Week. If you come to the Chapel on Wednesday, you will walk forward in silence, and a minister here will rub her finger in ashes, mark your forehead with the sign of the cross, and say, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The ashes on your forehead change the appearance of your face. They are a sign of death, brokenness, and the fragility of life. They are also a mark of glory. We bring to God all that is broken – in our lives, at Duke, in our world – and lay it at the feet of Christ. We pray to be transformed in the image of the Son of God. Look again at the stained glass window. Christ stands on the doorstep, one hand welcoming strangers into the household of God; one hand stretched out for love of the world. His arms are always open, his embrace is freely offered. His face, is broken and empty, yet full of light. Let your face be transfigured by the ashes, let it be broken and remade in the image of Christ, that it might radiate with God’s glory. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://spotlight.duke.edu/50years/>

<sup>4</sup> Samuel D. Proctor was the first African American to preach at Duke Chapel, April 12, 1964.