

## RADIANCE

Sermon Preached at Duke Chapel

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It was our fourth day of backpacking in the Rocky Mountains. As a newcomer to the Rockies I had been struck by their stark, craggy beauty. But nothing had prepared me for the morning when we climbed up a steep ridge high above our camp. From an overlook we could gaze up the valley to a luminous glistening lake and then back the other way to fold after fold of mountains. It had been a hard ascent, but standing there on that peak everything in that sweeping vista seemed to flow together. Peak and meadow, tree and sky, all seemed to be singing some chorus of praise.

I hesitate to say too much about what was a passing moment, but standing there with my two companions I sensed that everything I saw was somehow part of one radiant life, that I belonged to it and it belonged to me. It almost seemed as if I were sensing a harmony pulsing through the landscape.

In those few moments I no longer felt that I was an isolated “I” taking all this in, but was part of a “we,” an “us,” that included my companions and the mountains and the stream below and the world far beyond the horizon. I wanted to stay and not turn loose of that instant.

But then when as we scrambled with our day packs down from the ridge, life seemed ordinary again, enough to make me wonder whether what I had sensed was real at all.

I don’t make any special claim for that mountaintop moment. I tell you about it not because I think it is rare but because I’m convinced it’s not. I don’t know where or when a mountaintop moment has happened for you, but my hunch is that it has. A moment washes over you walking along a beach or even down a crowded street, gazing down from an airplane at 30,000 feet, or listening to the Bach’s “B minor Mass,” and you sense a sacred connection, a beauty, a holiness in everything around you.

It can even happen in a Starbucks—or an early forerunner of Starbucks. Listen to the poet William Butler Yeats writing a century ago:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat, a solitary man,  
In a crowded London shop  
An open book and empty cup  
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed,  
My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.

Moments of radiance like these announce that there is far more going on in our world than can be measured and analyzed. We encounter in those times what the Celtic tradition calls

“thin places,” when the veil between time and eternity drops away and God’s glory and goodness shine through.

We humans are border walkers, living on the boundary between the physical and the spiritual, called inevitably to dwell in both worlds. “There is another world,” the poet Czeslaw Milosz has said, “and it is in this one.” We Christians call this a sacramental world, a world charged with the grandeur of God, even though most of the time we are too frenetic and self-absorbed to see.

These mountaintop moments are times when we catch a glimpse of a deeper, more interconnected world than we imagined. Sometimes those are moments of radiance and harmony, but there are also more complex experiences that reveal a deeper, truer world—an illness that skates the edge of death, a job or family crisis that opens new doors, or an unexpected invitation comes along that ends up changing our life.

I heard a few years ago Minneapolis businessman Ward Brehm describe how his life was turned upside down by an encounter with a world not of glory but of tragedy. Making his way out of church one Sunday his pastor asked, “How would you like to go to Africa?” Brehm said his minister could have as easily asked him if he would like to go to the moon. “Well, will you pray about it?” the pastor asked. “No, you’re the pastor. You pray about it and I’ll think about it.”

Two months later Brehm was arriving at the airport to meet the group he was traveling with, which turned out to be the pastor and a group of ten, “church ladies,” as he called them. That was alarming enough for him, and then they decided to all hold hands in the airport and pray before they left. And Brehm says all he could pray was that none of his friends or clients would see what he was doing.

But Brehm says, “From the moment I stepped onto African soil my life was altered.” He saw a world that before had only existed for him as a set of statistics. In Ethiopia he listened to surviving family members telling stories of loved ones lost during the years of famine; in Uganda he saw people everywhere dying of AIDS. For the first time, the senselessness of people starving to death overwhelmed him.

Brehm said that those few days turned his world upside down. Everything about the priorities that had been governing his life would have to change, and he began spending a significant portion of each year doing relief work in this new land.

God finally found a way to get through to him, Brehm says. “Sometimes God gets our attention with a pebble. Sometimes it takes a rock. And when that doesn’t work, God throws a brick. Africa was my brick.” Africa had opened his eyes to a an immense, interconnected world that existed beyond his wildest imagining.

One day something extraordinary happened to Jesus and his three closest friends—Peter, James, and John. Tension had been building in Jesus’ ministry and for the first time he was beginning to talk about death and the cross and the cost of what they were doing. He and his disciples were likely exhausted and increasingly worried about where things were going. So Jesus took his friends up on Mt. Tabor, far away from the crush of the crowds. And there he and the disciples experienced something so strange and mysterious that they had no idea how to describe it.

We call it the Transfiguration. For a few moments the disciples saw Jesus in a way they never had—shining bright as the sun. And somehow incomprehensibly, they saw the great heroes of old, Moses and Elijah, there with him.

The entire experience was overwhelming, confusing, even frightening. The impulsive Peter, not knowing what to say, blurted out, “Lord it is good to be here,” and suggested making three buildings to memorialize this stunning event. Let’s capture this moment and hold on to the glory, he was urging, and stay up here away from the turmoil down the mountain.

And then a cloud overshadowed them and they heard a Voice declare, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” And suddenly it was all over. Everything and everyone had vanished except Jesus and the disciples, and he led them in silence back down the mountain and into the fray—to a roiling crowd and a desperate father with his gravely ill son. The veil between God and humans had come back down.

This is not a story of a simple moment of radiance, but a halting, confusing effort to describe the indescribable—an encounter with God and a vision of one human being filled completely with God’s life. This is an encounter with a God who is not one of us, who is holy, which means “other.” It is a coming face to face with what the scholars call the “mysterium tremendum et fascinans,” the shattering, overwhelming reality of the great and mysterious God. And it is a moment of confirmation of Jesus and his mission, as the Voice from heaven repeats the heavenly words from his baptism – “This is my Son, my Beloved.”

Some scholars have wondered if this was actually an encounter with the risen Lord after the resurrection, and Mark wanted to put the full revelation of who Jesus was back into the middle of his story. But however this story emerged, Christians through the centuries and especially in the Eastern Orthodox Church came to believe that this Transfigured Jesus was an image of the God-filled humanity we were made to become and the God-filled universe that is God’s ultimate vision for the cosmos. To gaze at Christ transfigured is to glimpse our own future filled with God’s light and love. One day we will all be transfigured.

St. Paul said that this transfiguration is the destiny for everyone. “All of us, with unveiled faces,” he wrote, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

Ward Brehm was transfigured by his experience in Africa. Desmond Tutu tells us that it was sitting in the garden of a theological college in South Africa on the Feast of the Transfiguration, as the evil of apartheid was weighing most heavily, that transformed him and gave him hope. He says he gazed at a plain cross in the garden, and then at the brown grass and leafless trees of winter, and became utterly convinced that as God’s transfiguring Spirit working in nature will bring fresh grass and leaves and flowers out of death, so that same transfiguring Spirit will bring about a new and free South Africa. The paths we tread may be dark, but we have our moments of glory and revelation to show us the way.

To this beautiful Duke Chapel, and to churches of every size and shape, we come week by week to our own Mount of Transfiguration. When you and I arrived here this morning we left behind the tumble and turmoil of our days to come into this glorious space—not for moral instruction or to pick up a few pearls of wisdom but to have our imaginations captured with words, music, and transcendent beauty. We come to glimpse the glory and wonder of God, to open our eyes to the Holy and to the oneness that binds everything.

Our world is perishing for lack of worship and adoration, one contemporary mystic has argued. “You worship or you shrink, it’s as brutal as that,” a character blurts out in Peter Schaffer’s play *Equus*. We come here to open our eyes, to see the beauty of Christ in the grace and wonder of worship and to allow ourselves to be gathered into a vision of our Transfigured Lord. And then we are sent back down the mountain to join with Christ in his healing work.

“This is my Son, my Beloved,” the Voice declares. “Listen to him.” And that is what we are called to do—to listen to him as he shows us how to live in this world charged with the grandeur of God, as he calls us to turn to those most in need, as he sends us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to welcome the stranger, to forgive and be forgiven.

The great monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton saw this radiant light most clearly not in the solitude of his monastic life, but one day when he was running errands in downtown Louisville, Kentucky and paused for a moment at a busy intersection. Listen to what he wrote in his journal:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.... If only everybody could realize this! There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

That’s the truth of this day. That every one of us and every person we will encounter in this coming week is shining like the sun—whether we can see it or not. And Christ our Transfigured Lord is here to lead us, down the mountain, into this world that is charged everywhere with God’s radiant light.