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St. Martin's Church, Radnor PA
Last Sunday after the Epiphany, The Transfiguration,
Sunday, Feb. 19, 2012**

In the transfiguration of Jesus, the disciples witness him as a being of pure, dazzling light. It is one of the most visually spectacular moments of Jesus ministry. It is also one deeply related, hopefully, to our own experience of God. It's an important story, found in all 3 Synoptic Gospels: Mark, Matthew and Luke. And we observe it not once but twice in our church calendar, on the last Sunday of Epiphany, today, and in August. It's a big deal.

Our story today comes just after Peter has identified Jesus *prematurely* as the Messiah, and Jesus famously rebukes him with the words, "Get behind me Satan." He instructs his disciples that each must take up their own cross to be his followers. Jesus emphatically does not want to be mistaken for a mere miracle worker, glorifying himself though healing. He's after bigger game. He wants to change people's hearts. The focus is always on God— God's power coming through him—never on himself. Jesus simply did not want people turning to him for the wrong reasons.

And yet, the transfiguration occurs in the presence of Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest, most consequential Jewish prophets. This star-studded event demonstrates that Jesus is concretely the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, a fulfillment of the promises of God that Moses and Elijah were instrumental in articulating. Yet also, the disciples witness it as powerful personal experience. In one moment, they perceive his whole, complete being in its true nature. In her poem *Transfiguration*, Madeline L'engle writes, "Suddenly they saw him the way he was,/the way he really was all the time,/ although they had never seen it before –/ the glory which blinds the everyday eye and so becomes invisible./This is how he was:/radiant, brilliant, carrying joy like a flaming sun in his hands."

Remember that light in scripture is the symbolic, visible presence of God come into the world through Jesus. So when we hear that they saw the love of God shining through Jesus as pure light, transforming him, revealing his true self, yet another invitation is being extended to us. An invitation with the disciples, to see things, even for a moment,

as they really are. To get a glimpse even of what *we* really, are, underneath the everyday world we experience. The spirit of God in, and of, all that is.

What jumps out at me about the story of Elijah and Elisha today is not so much the pyrotechnics, the flaming horses and chariots, but it's humanity and intimacy in the midst of grand biblical events. The prophet of God Elijah is clearly aged and about to die, and keeps trying to ditch Elisha, his heir apparent. But Elisha repeatedly tells him tenderly, "I will not leave you." When other priests wish to speak of Elijah's obvious decline, Elisha simply requests their silence, and respectfulness, "Yes I know. Keep silence." Then Elijah strikes the Jordan and parts the water in a profound gesture, just as Joshua did upon the Jewish people's first entry into the Promised Land. This signifies a second deliverance, another flight from bondage into freedom for the aging and new prophet, and for the people of Israel.

And in the midst of all this drama, Elisha's only request of God's most powerful prophet, his dying friend and teacher Elijah is, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." It's as if he's saying, "I am so inadequate, I need a double portion of God's graciousness to be as great as you." Elijah only answers that if Elisha sees him being taken in his last hour, sees things as they are, this wish will be granted. And suddenly "a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven."

Elisha witnesses the transfiguration of Elijah. In the moment of truth he sees not only Elijah's humanity, involved in living and dying, but also the divine shining through him as flames of fire. Elisha sees Elijah as he truly is—a being born in, illuminated by, and returning to the light of God—and is thereby empowered as a prophet by doing so. And this idea of people both as physical, finite beings, and at the same time as living vessels and conductors of God's light, opens up a whole new perspective. It makes me think about how I see people transfigured all the time. I see it in the couples that come to speak to me before getting married as they talk about each other; I see it as they stand before the altar, literally glowing in God's love. There is nothing like it.

This past week I was in Florida visiting my mom with Amanda. I saw it in many of the elderly couples taking care of one another. Feeding each other. Reading to each other. Tending each other. Pure love asking for nothing but itself. Yesterday I was with Ben and

Margaret Bell and their kids over in rehab. I met Ben Jr., and one of the first things he told me about his mom and dad was that they are “soul mates, not cell mates.” Theirs’ is a love that is so close, so intimate, so bound with one another, and is based solely upon choice and the freedom to love entirely. I had a chance to speak to both Ben and Margaret privately, and amid all the challenges, they are both most happy when talking about the other- it lights them up.

And this question of transfiguration also makes me think about my self—what lights me up, and why. I can tell you that falling in love with Amanda is nothing less than an experience of the fierce glow of God’s love, after much darkness, entering, illuminating, and transforming my life. I asked a good friend of mine who is a nurse—“So what lights you up, what changes your body chemistry, what do you look like when you are being truly who you are?” And her answer was when one of the troubled kids she works with, some of the most wounded among us, make her laugh and they share a moment of peace and calm together. She finds warmth in their hugs that she feels no where else, precisely because of the sense of bringing light and love into lives that sometimes have become very dark, and frightened.

What seems to distinguish stories of transfiguration is that the power and clarity of God is expressed specifically through our relatedness to others. Transfiguration, being witnessed as a vessel of God’s light, is always experienced through relationship: Elijah and Elisha; Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and the disciples on the mountain; my mom, Amanda, the Bells, those kids my friend serves, you and those you light up, and are lit from within by. All the parts of the never-ending human romance with God and each other that is life and faith. These scriptures we read and ponder together are always inviting us into their questions, always asking us to be more than observers.

Like Jesus, we are, right now, embarking on a journey to Jerusalem. In the coming weeks we, along with the disciples, the curious and the skeptical, will walk the hills, feed the hungry, heal the sick, and listen. Watch for God showing God’s self. And like the disciples, we are asked to witness transformations. We are asked to see the light of Christ, and seek the light of Christ in all persons, and to see things, and to see ourselves, for what we truly are: rays of light burst from the very heart of God. Let’s be on our way.

In the spirit of the Light of Love that is God’s gift to the world in Jesus, Amen.