

**"Dazzling"**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr**  
**FPC, New Canaan – February 11, 2024**

**PLEASE READ:**  
**II Kings 1:2-12**  
**Mark 9:2-9**

Today is Transfiguration Sunday when we celebrate and explore the meaning of the *transfiguration* of Jesus, what St. Thomas Aquinas deemed to be the greatest of all of Jesus' miracles. The word translated "transfiguration" is *metamorphosis* in the Greek, which of course means a change in the figure or form of something. The event of the revealing, even for a moment, of the divine glory of Jesus is recorded in all three synoptic gospels as well as by the writer of II Peter. Why is it important?

What struck me again as I read Mark's description was the adjective "Dazzling," *στύλβοντα* in the Greek. It's only used once in the New Testament, and that's a clue that something unique is going on here.

Most of us are attracted to that which is "dazzling," shiny or radiant. Today is also Super Bowl Sunday, and the NFL championship game is one of the most watched sporting events in the world, broadcast in over 130 countries in more than 30 languages with around 100 million viewers tuning in (although World Cup is estimated to be 1.5 billion)! The game is important in America anyway, and equally entertaining are the commercials and advertisements that cost around \$7 million dollars for a 30 second spot. And then there is the half-time show. It's supposed to be dazzling, really, often with light show and fireworks. This year, R&B singer Usher, promises to roller skate on stage... and not formally part of the festivities, we're hoping to catch a glimpse of Taylor Swift to add some drama as she flies in from Japan for the game! All of this is happening in Las Vegas, which is bling-bling town with more dazzling distractions than anywhere on the planet.

Perhaps we can think of the transfiguration as Mark's version of the halftime show. Mark, throughout the Gospel, asserts that Jesus has transforming power over old religious traditions, social structures, medical and spiritual illnesses and handicaps, over the physical laws of nature itself. In the context of Mark, then, it is not so surprising to read this account of the revelation to the Peter, James and John. It was not only a moment of transfiguration for Jesus, then, but *a transfiguring experience for the disciples*.

Those three disciples were given a premonition as to the final outcome of Jesus' *dis*figuration on the cross, as they could see with their own eyes the previously hidden majesty and glory of God in Jesus. His clothes became dazzling white, and with him appeared the two greatest prophets of Jewish history - Moses and Elijah.

It was Moses who had received God's holy commandments. Moses also had experienced a theophany, the presence of the Divine Light on Mount Sinai. He himself also radiated the light of God's presence.

Elijah, another great prophet, was viewed by Jews as the one who would usher in the Day of the Lord. This was the time when God would powerfully reveal himself, bringing judgement on all evil, and complete his work of redemption among all people. The Jews believed that both Moses and Elijah lived on in the glory of God.

On top of that hill, then, the disciples were privileged to witness Jesus conversing with Moses, and Elijah, transfigured into heavenly form... It was in the middle of Jesus' ministry, and they were appropriately distracted by the dazzling display.

Peter, in his typically impulsive manner, blurts out an offer to make three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter probably had in mind the tents or booths used in the Feast of the Tabernacles, a Jewish festival which remembers the exodus journeying through the wilderness, but also looks toward the coming and ultimate triumph of the people of Israel. Peter wanted to build tents for the leaders who had ushered in the Final Age, to secure the moment, to literally stake it down.

Peter... He is be-dazzled and awed by the powerful supernatural reality which Christ reveals, but when it comes to following Jesus, we know that later he struggled with basic loyalty. You get the idea that God is impatient with Peter and interrupts his outburst. As if to silence him, a cloud overshadows them, and a voice from the cloud says: "This is my Son, the Beloved; Listen to him!"

Now here's where this story gets interesting for me. The dazzle is a distraction. And so God literally turns the lights out by surrounding everyone in a cloud. Clouds, of course, block the dazzling sunshine. It's as though in the dynamic of this story we are reminded how too often we are enamoured with the exotic, the extraordinary; the razzle dazzle of the miraculous, mystical experiences; the supernatural and the fantastic... Too quickly we forget life is primarily lived in ordinary day to day experiences. We don't like the fact that much of discipleship is lived primarily in the monotony of learning to listen to Jesus, to obey God's word, to pray and love our neighbors. We may have a mountain top experience... But suddenly the awe-inspiring event is over, and we must come down off of the mountain.

If we only expect new life to come from the unexpected and the miraculous, then we have not heard the Word of Christ, for the message of salvation is *for each moment* - even each and every mundane moment of our lives. Fantastic events in life are a blessing indeed, and although they can be adrenaline-fed *turning points of faith*, they cannot be the *focus points* of faith. Such supernatural experiences are meant to illuminate our perspective in order to see Jesus for who he really is, and to hear more clearly his call to live faithfully through the less inspiring times of life.

Yesterday at the Leadership Retreat, we talked about peace and what it means to be a community which makes peace, being internally strong and externally focused. We had some great conversations and came up with some thoughtful goals that we will pursue during the year. But when push comes to shove, our real goal is simply to continue to listen and discern the leading of Jesus and do our level best to obey his word and show his love in our everyday lives. That's what it's all about!

We continue to be heartbroken and frustrated by so much of what's going on in the world. And so, I am fascinated by examples of people who choose to live by faith. Did you see the opinion article by Liat Atzili in the *New York Times*,<sup>1</sup> recently? She is a high school teacher in Kiryat Gat, Israel, and an educator at Yad Vashem. On October 7<sup>th</sup>, her home was destroyed, her husband and her dog were killed by terrorists. She was taken hostage and after 54 days was released. She talks about the Jewish concept of *tekumah*, very much what transfiguration,

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<sup>1</sup> Liat Atzili, "Choosing Rebirth Over Revenge After My Release from Gaza," (NYT, February 4, 2024), Op ed section, p. 4

transformation, or metamorphosis is all about. It can be translated “rebirth.” But it’s also a choice about which future you will pursue... revenge, or renewal through building a better life and fairer world for all?

So down from the peaks to the plains we return. We may not know what to do next, what to say, or where to go. Perhaps that’s another lesson of this text. We need to learn when to speak, and when to remain silent. The main thing, and at times the only thing we can do, is to listen to Jesus, to hear his reassuring voice.

All the Super Bowl brilliance will fade to be sure. Beginning this week on Ash Wednesday, we will remember the less than dazzling fact that “from dust you have come and to dust you shall return.” As the disciples came down from the mountain, Jesus reminded them he was headed for the cross. We may find ourselves thinking that what Jesus does and says is strange. We wonder what is going on here, why suffering is unavoidable, that the first shall be last, that we are to forgive others, that we are to love our enemies, die to self, and so forth... And then, in some stunning moment we may experience *tekumah*... transfiguration. It could happen at any moment...

I love Malcom Guite’s poem entitle, *Transfiguration*...

For that one moment, ‘in and out of time’,  
On that one mountain where all moments meet,  
The daily veil that covers the sublime  
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.  
There were no angels full of eyes and wings  
Just living glory full of truth and grace.  
The Love that dances at the heart of things  
Shone out upon us from a human face  
And to that light the light in us leaped up,  
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,  
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope  
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.  
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar  
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

Indeed, the dazzling love that dances at the heart of things is always here for us, sometimes shiny and loud, but mostly experienced in the quiet moments of everyday life. Either way, our promise and our hope is that if we listen to Jesus, *he will change us*.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*