

Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday
February 14, 2021
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Today is the last Sunday before the season of Lent begins. The last Sunday before we begin a 40-day journey of reflection on God's promises, culminating in an observance of God's greatest promise of love in the face of death, and finally new life. We read this mountaintop story today, the story of the transfiguration, getting one last glimpse of glory before we hike down the mountain and start our journey together. A reading from the gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 2-9.

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

May these words be to us our light and our life.

Thanks be to God.

One of the greatest joys of parenting - and I think the same could be said of being an aunt or an uncle or a godparent or a great friend to a young person - is introducing them to your favorite books. I've had the opportunity to do this with our two-and-a-half-year-old Phoebe, so far through Clifford the Big Red Dog and Harold and the Purple Crayon

and *Where the Wild Things Are*. I can't wait to introduce her to one of my all-time favorites, *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. I read this classic first as a curious and precocious third-grader, again as a moody and disillusioned middle schooler, again when my seminary journey called me to the wonder and spirituality of fiction, and finally as an adult in a book club as the 2018 movie was released. This book has traveled with me through so many seasons of life, and each time I hear its message anew. The journey of teenage Meg Murray through the tumult of adolescence, the trauma of her father's disappearance, and the cosmic struggle between good and evil is timeless and compelling no matter your age.

Meg begins her journey on a dark and stormy night, as her uncannily intelligent five-year-old brother, Charles Wallace, introduces her to a highly unusual friend of his who turns out to be a celestial being called Mrs. Whatsit. Through Charles Wallace's openness, curiosity, and imagination, Meg meets two more characters, Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which, and they travel through the universe searching for Meg and Charles Wallace's father, who disappeared without a trace not long ago. In the midst of all of this, Meg feels like a misfit, an outcast, and she reacts with angry outbursts and high-level suspicion of just about everyone. She finds it within herself, though, to trust these three Mrs. W's and head out on an adventure to save her father. They visit planets so different from Earth, it's almost hard to fathom, and they travel not only through space but through time as well. They find that a terrible evil is spreading throughout the universe, and they need to find the source. They find it on the planet that houses Meg's father, Camazotz, and encounter a strange villain, a giant brain called IT. IT controls the entire planet and must be defeated to rescue Meg's father. Charles Wallace tries to defeat IT with his intellect, but he fails and falls under IT's control. Meg realizes it's up to her to save her father and her brother. The three celestial beings, Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which, tell Meg that she will be able to defeat IT with the one thing IT doesn't have. Meg, feeling inadequate and unsure, struggles to determine what that thing might be. And then it hits her: it's love. Love for Charles Wallace and love for her father. Through love, she is able to save her family and defeat evil. And she is changed, too. Through her love, others are able to see what they couldn't before: a power and a strength and a courage that the world desperately needs.

Up on that mountaintop, Jesus and Peter and James and John have been on a journey. Jesus called, and these disciples responded, and together they've traveled around,

healing and feeding people, being present to their pain. They've been outcasts and have found themselves situated outside of cultural norms and social niceties. But on that mountaintop, it becomes clear that it's all been worth it. Jesus stands with Moses and Elijah, the three standing as champions of God's love. A love that can save them, and save the world.

For a long time, I thought about what happened to Meg in that scene with IT as transformation. Meg became a new version of herself once she realized what she had that IT didn't. She was transformed by love. But then, I read the following reflection from Biblical scholar Melinda Quivik:

"We might use the words "transfigure" and "transform" interchangeably, but there is a helpful distinction to keep in mind. To be transfigured is to be changed in outward form or appearance. Jesus' transfiguration does not alter who he is but gives to those who see the changed visage a new understanding of him because they see him outwardly in a different light. When we speak of transformation we tend to mean a complete or essential change in composition or structure. Jesus on the mountain with Moses and Elijah is not transformed (changed inwardly) but transfigured before his disciples (shown to be other than assumed). He is not made to have a new essential self but an appearance that conveys his standing in the company of Israel's greatest prophets."

How powerful it is to see transfiguration as a move that makes our outsides match our insides - that allows others to see who and what we truly are. That's what happened to Meg. Behind her prickly exterior was a girl so filled with love that she'd travel the universe to save her family. Behind Jesus's humble presentation is a promise of love so deep and so powerful that it transcends death. All of us have that inner self, that God-given self, that is just waiting to be seen and perceived and recognized. That inner self that is guided by love.

Today is Valentine's Day, a celebration of love, and it's become a holiday about roses and chocolate and romance, which is totally fine if that's your thing, but the love that inspired this holiday is of a different kind altogether. Saint Valentine was an early Christian, living in Rome during the third century CE. This was a time when Christians were among the most persecuted groups, and Saint Valentine ministered to persecuted Christians and in so doing risked his own life. He was martyred for his efforts to feed and

heal and pray with those most in need in his community. This is a kind of love that goes far beyond conversation hearts. It's a love that changed the trajectory of St. Valentine's life. It's a love that, when we can see it in all its fullness, has the power to change the world.

We are living in a world deeply in need of transfiguration. I mean that in a few different ways. Our world needs the spirit of the divine to shine through each one of us, just as it did for Jesus on that mountaintop. We are all made in God's image, and we all have that spark of divine love within us. The world needs us to have the courage to take off our armor, push past others' misconceptions of us, and allow that divine love to emerge.

But more importantly, the world needs us to be like Peter and James and John on that mountaintop - to open our eyes and see. To perceive the divine within our fellow humans, to see the light emanating from them, and to allow that to change us.

This week has been a challenging one as we have been reminded of the events of January 6th through the impeachment proceedings. Our divisions and our brokenness feel more present than ever. I don't pretend to know what is going to heal us. But I do know that centering divine and transforming love is part of it. Allowing the divine within us to perceive and connect with the divine within others - including, and perhaps especially, those with whom we disagree - has the power to create mountaintop moments. And accessing that transforming love prepares us for the journey ahead, not so different from the journey Jesus and Peter and James and John embarked on. Not so different from the journey Meg took with her unlikely companions.

Our journey through Lent that we will begin on Wednesday is a journey to seek and perceive and follow God's promises even amidst situations that feel desperate and hopeless. And it is only possible with companions. Companions who reveal God's love to us in new ways, and who help us to get in touch with God's love within ourselves.

I want to offer a blessing from Jan Richardson for this day, and for the love we celebrate.

This is:

When Glory: A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday

That when glory comes,
we will open our eyes
to see it.

That when glory shows up,
we will let ourselves
be overcome
not by fear
but by the love
it bears.

That when glory shines,
we will bring it
back with us
all the way,
all the way,
all the way down.

Be changed by the glory of God present within you and within all God's children. Let it change you. Let it change the world. Amen.