

“An Everlasting Light of Love”

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As a child, I often attended Sunday school alone. But, from time to time, I managed to convince my younger sister to also attend Sunday school. She really enjoyed the music and she loved doing the weekly crafts, but what I remember most is how attentive and responsive she was to the bible lesson. She would listen intently to what the Sunday school teacher had to say and then, when she got home, she would always try to implement what she had learned. She was only 4 or 5 years old at the time, so as you might imagine, her means of applying these biblical teachings within her life were often very creative and sometimes quite cute or comical.

Picture it, after her second or third visit to Sunday school, she came home and immediately began rummaging through the house. I watched her for a while as she checked under the bed, in the closet, in the fridge, and in every dark and hidden corner of the house. Every time that she opened a door or peaked into a potential hiding place, you could hear her whisper: “are you in here?”...“are you in here?”... “how about in here?” I had no idea what she was looking for, but she was determined and clearly starting to get frustrated. So, I went over and asked her: “what are you looking for?” She looked at me with eyes full of certainty and explained that her Sunday school teacher taught her that God is everywhere. She was searching for God – but she couldn’t seem to find God. She couldn’t see God in the fridge. And didn’t appear to be under the bed where the monsters were. It seemed that God was either missing or invisible.

Wishing to bring her comfort, I began helping her search. We had learned and we believed that God was everywhere, but no matter how frantically we searched or how determined we were – we couldn’t seem to locate God amidst the space in which we lived most of our lives. Was God hiding? Was the Sunday school teacher wrong? Or, were we just unable to see God? In a childlike manner, we began to ask each other: what does God look like? What does God smell like? What does God taste, or sound, or feel like? Of course, we eventually determined that we really had no idea what we were even looking for. We simply assumed that we would know if and when we found God.

Today’s gospel narrative of Christ’s transfiguration often reminds me of that childhood moment of searching for God.

As we heard in today’s text, Jesus goes up the mountain to pray alongside of James, Peter, and John. Luke’s gospel narrates that this was about 8 days after Jesus foretold of his imminent death and resurrection. Luke’s account goes on to illustrate that while praying, Christ’s face undergoes what the Greek language refers to as a *heteron* (ἕτερον) type of transformation. This

Greek word simply means that Christ's face was transformed in a way that made it appear different than it usually appeared. And despite many artistic interpretations and illustrations of this event, the Bible does not tell us the exact details of how Christ's face was transformed. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke do however go on to state that while Christ's face is transformed, his clothes become dazzling white. While all of this is happening, the three disciples are watching with tired eyes and suddenly see Moses and Elijah appear beside Jesus... and then, just in case there is any lingering confusion about what is going on, a cloud overshadows the disciples and proclaims: "this is my son, my chosen; listen to him."

In this moment of transfiguration, Peter, James, and John are able to clearly see and hear the presence of God both in and through their friend Jesus and in and through the voice of God. Before their very eyes, they catch a glimpse of divinity, of God's transformative love and power and there is no doubt that God is actively on the scene. But the story doesn't stop there – this moment of transfiguration, transformation, and certainty eventually concludes and these four men go back down the mountain and are reunited with the demands of their ministry. Luke notes that a crowd is waiting for Jesus to come down the mountain and within that crowd there is a child who is tormented and suffering – and that child and his father are waiting for God to show up to administer healing. Jesus of course has compassion and through his divinity, heals the child.

This second half of the story often gets overlooked. In fact, it is an optional part of today's lectionary text. But, when we read this healing narrative in addition to Luke's account of the transfiguration, we see a perfect contrast between a God who is "up there" on the mountain or in the sky – and a God who is present amidst the harsh realities of human suffering. For the Christ who was clearly identified as God's chosen son on the mountain top, is the same Christ who comes down the mountain to bring the divine gift of God's love to a world filled with suffering people - that they might hear, and touch, and see, and know the transformative reality of God's grace and compassion.

In the incarnation of Christ, we witness the divine participating in our humanity and in today's gospel narrative of the transfiguration, we see Christ coming down the mountain and creating a means in which human beings can participate and share in divine glory.

One of the things that I love about Lutheran theology is what Martin Luther coined as the theology of the cross. A part of the theology of the cross is that God is present amidst human suffering. God isn't just some "out there" form of divinity, but is a present part of our everyday living – suffering alongside of us. And that is what today's gospel text illustrates – God, through Jesus, being an active presence amidst our lives – rejoicing, suffering, sharing, and being present alongside of us. But the trouble is that it can be so hard to see God. My sister and I searched and searched, but struggled to find a tangible expression of God's presence. We wanted so badly to see something similar to the transfiguration – something that would show us, without a doubt, that God was present amidst our lives...but God appeared to be missing. Likewise, from perspectives of suffering, hurt, illness, and injustice – it can be so difficult to see

God's presence and transformative love at work in both the world and our lives.

But whether we recognize it or not – the gospel of Christ teaches that God is here – present with us. Christ, Emmanuel, is God with us. I am so thankful that God's presence isn't dependent upon my understanding or recognition. That God is omnipotently present with grace and compassion. That Christ has bridged the gap between the realm of the human and the divine.

Today's gospel message is that in and through Jesus Christ, there is hope for eternity, but also hope amidst the here and the now. And at the same time, perhaps the challenge of the gospel message is to live in acceptance and acknowledgement of God's presence amidst even the darkest corners of this world. To live in acceptance and acknowledgement that God is present amidst the tensions and conflicts on parliament hill. That God is present amidst the Algerian civil uprising. That God is present amidst the pipeline explosion in southern Nigeria. That God is present with the homeless, the sick, the begging, and the suffering people that get pushed to the fringes of our society – the people that are so easily overlooked by our society, despite the fact that God is present and that God also calls us to be present and attentive amidst these circumstances.

Through Jesus, God enters the world of our everyday living and is present with us. And through that very same Jesus, we are given the freedom to step beyond the everyday patterns of the human condition – and are invited to participate in God's kingdom of glory. May we live in acceptance of this reality – in acceptance of the fact that God is presently active and at work in the world. May we embrace the voice from the cloud that instructs Peter, James, and John to listen to the words and teaching of God's chosen Son. May we follow Christ's example of humble servanthood and love – may we participate in what God is already doing in and through the gift and presence of Jesus Christ. May our hearts and our minds be transfigured in a way that allows us to recognize and embrace God's loving and active presence within our lives.

Christ is present in both the joys and the sufferings of this life. Present with the ability to heal and to forgive. Present with grace and with a love that has the willingness and power to transfigure and to transform even the most seemingly hopeless of situations.

God is here – God is with us. Through his mercy and love we are transformed alongside of Jesus – from children lost in darkness to children filled with the everlasting light of God's love. Amen.