

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

By the light of his countenance: from today's collect.

Dazzling.

In *El Prado*, the treasured national museum of Spain, located in the verdant *Retiro Parque* in Madrid, there is an enormous collection of paintings, many from the heady days of the Spanish Empire: Goya's, Velasquez', El Greco's abound. Fortunate as I was to be in this tremendous palace several years ago, I walked around and became saturated with the splendid magnificence of it all. Room after room of splendor. And then I came upon a small painting, perhaps two feet by three feet, stuck in a narrow passage between two large salons.

I was struck immediately by this haunting oil. The painter, Zurbaran, a master of shadow and light, emphasis on shadow, entitled this painting, *Agnus Dei*, the *Lamb of God*, words we will repeat in a few minutes, as we do at every Eucharist. The painting is stark, clean, provocative. The likeness on the canvas is of a lamb lying on a dark grey slab against a black background. The lamb is dazzlingly white, as some lambs are, and has an aspect on its face I would call anticipation, though it may be resignation. It was so moving to me, I wept.

I thought of this painting some days ago as I was preparing these remarks, for this complex feast, the Transfiguration.

The *tions*, you know, Annunci**ation**, Presentati**on**, Visitati**on**, Incarnati**on**, these add-ons which turn verbs into events, well, I have some understanding of them. The Transfiguri**ation** I have avoided fully grasping. It seems theologically dense, or maybe not. It is daunting to contemplate this event in the life of Jesus, occurring on one singular day.

On that particular morning, Jesus must have had a deep intuition that something *would* occur, *needed* to occur, *must* occur. As an utterly human being, he would not have had foreknowledge, but as a man of deep interiority, he trusted the *still, small voice* within.

Many years ago, the Episcopal priest and errant trickster Alan Watts wrote: *Jesus had an overwhelming experience of cosmic consciousness at an early age.* I sense a deep understanding in Watt's insight, that this utterly human Jesus had a consciousness of immense proportions. Perhaps like the ones we are invited to develop. And, perhaps, on this particular morning, this consciousness would be fully realized.

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus took his threesome, Peter, James, and John, up the mountain. These three were apparently his best friends, always being invited along. Jude, also an Apostle and my confirmation name—the saint of hopeless cases—Jude is never invited anywhere. Nonetheless, this posse, *per usual*, accompanied Jesus up the mountain.

And in the text, without any further introduction or explanation: *He was transfigured* before them, his face *shone like the sun*, his clothes *dazzling white*. There's more: Moses and Elijah were somehow present— suggesting the law and the prophets, the twin pillars of Jesus' Jewish tradition—and they were talking amongst themselves. So much astounding stuff going on.

And there's more: Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them all, and from the cloud came a Voice, not *still*, not *silent*: *This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.*

This cloud, this voice, this declaration, *like at Jesus' baptism*, comes now, as Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem, to meet his holy fate.

Peter and others response to the majestic voice: falling to the ground, overwhelmed with fear. For Peter, this would not be the last time. In Renaissance paintings, the three appear to be *un-conscious. Evidently.* Jesus then came to his friends and *touched them.* He told them, once again, *do not to be afraid.*

So complex a vignette. Transfigured! One definition: a complete change of form into a more beautiful or spiritual state. Nice, but this verbiage doesn't quite capture what we have just witnessed.

Jesus' transfiguration is a pivotal, a singular moment: his human nature *visibly* encounters the divine, God and person are fused, and *Jesus' true identity is revealed.* That identity rests on the fulcrum that God, this ineffable holy presence, dwells *with and in* him. *Is* in him. *Is* palpably manifest in him. And this *him?* *My beloved son.*

The great ecumenist Jaroslav Pelikan says:

*The Holy is too great and too terrible when encountered directly for people **of normal sanity** to be able to contemplate it. Only those who care **not about the consequences** can run the risk of confrontation with the Holy.*

Nicholas of Cusa, the fifteenth century German mystic, wrote:

For You are the Word of God humanified and You are Man deified.

The Transfiguration: *God humanified, Man deified.*

This moment, so magnificent and incomprehensible. Nonetheless, his friends covered in fear, willfully unconscious to what is occurring.

They, perhaps fearful that the necessity of their transformation was the heart of the *call* of this Rabbi, with whom they had been traipsing around Galilee and Judea for some three years now?

Too demanding the surrender this *call* might require?

Too dazzling the light for their deeply shadowed commitment to their unworthiness, too armored to allow this light to penetrate their finely-honed defenses?

Too much to bear that this *transfiguration* —now about and through and within Jesus—was also to be about *them*?

Last week, in his homily, Stephen used the word *transformed*, a least seven times, by my count. This transformation, this transfiguration, is what we are invited into, beckoned to undergo, when we encounter Jesus.

Like Jesus, we are invited to be transformed, our faces *shine like the sun*, our clothes made *dazzling*, even if they be dazzling navy or dazzling fuchsia or dazzling black? To be opened up, to become *conscious*. Like Jesus, we are beckoned to be fused to the divine, the holy one, the one we call God.

I have a dear friend, a cloistered nun in upstate New York whose name, aptly, is Grace. We met when I was in my early 20's in a small prayer group in St. Louis. We have been correspondents ever since. Several years ago, Grace, whose life is immersed in contemplative prayer, began identifying the divine by only one word, capitalized: *Love*. I found it annoying because I, too, have a resistant heart. It felt so intimate. But Grace persisted, one of the voices *Love* chose to break through to me, a life-long transfiguration still in progress.

This God, whose obscure but perhaps proper name *is* capital L *Love*, comes to us through many voices, from many touches, over many years. It comes with subtle light and soft explosions of dazzlement.

This Love comes when another *sees* us as we are, not as we would be, and our true selves begin to emerge.

This Love comes in prayer, when we experience what we previously had not, and are at once *present*, as our true selves emerge.

This Love comes when we wash another's feet on Maundy Thursday, flooding us with the humility consonant with the spiritual life. We are changed, as our true selves emerge.

This Love comes at Open Table, when one in need meets the parallel need in the other, and both are perhaps imperceptibly transformed, as one's true self emerges.

This *Love* knows no bounds. It penetrates our fears, our resentments, our beliefs that we are just beyond the pale, believing we are anyone other than this *beckoned* person, created by Love. Love does all this, and then Loves more.

It is inexhaustible. God, capital L, *transforms* us, *transmogrifies* us, *transfixes* us and then *transfigures* us, into the only thing Love wants: that we become ourselves, our true selves, our *whole* selves. You and I, we are the person Love requires, the person essential to God's accomplishing the work of Love in this world. No hands but ours, no eyes but ours, no hearts but ours. This is the way of Love.

This is what Jesus experienced on the holy mountain, this fullness of Love. This Love is what Peter and the posse desired and eventually succumbed to, their egos finally falling faint away. And this is what we desire. We would not be in this beautiful sacred space this morning for any other reason. We would not stand or kneel at the rail to receive the Eucharist with any other purpose but to fill our heart's desire: to *live out* the Love that dwells within, the desire to become whole, *ergo* holy, human beings. And as we do so, we become Love's emissaries to a wounded, hungry, chaotic yet desirous world.

The aforementioned inexpressibly beautiful painting by Zurbaran, the *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God, has two additional features I did not mention. There is a fine, faint gold nimbus, a slight halo floating just above its innocent lamb face. And its four hooves are tied together by a nearly imperceptible bit of rope. I suggest this painting is of the Transfiguration, this dazzling, beautiful Lamb of God, on the way to its death.

This, too, is part of the transfiguration we undergo. The dross is burned off, and that process, as we each already know, is a dying: the dying to the false self, to the *poseur*, to the self-sufficient *personae* that keep us from each other and from God, the one with a capital L.

That sage homilist referenced earlier said two weeks ago, in this pulpit, *If you want to know God, look to Jesus*. He repeated it as if we had not heard this before. It struck me that morning as *fresh*, as if I *had never* heard these words before. I had, but not exactly. But in that moment, perhaps *exactly*.

After pancakes this morning, during the next few weeks of Lent, we will continue the journey with Jesus we are always on as we accompany Jesus, as we *look to Jesus*, as he, and we, are on his holy, fated journey.

Even an ignominious death does not have the final say. God, capital L, *does*, by all the blessed names God goes by. And we, increasingly drawn in, beyond our imaginations, find ourselves—fears and frailty and what defects of character yet remain—by grace, dwelling, with Jesus, transfigured in the inexhaustible heart of this Love.

