

Light Bearers
A Sermon by Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D., M.T.S.

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First Congregational Church
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What a blessing to be with you as you celebrate Ute's leadership and your mutual relationship and ministry. Our Gospel today features Jesus's Transfiguration. Jesus' face is changed and even his clothes become dazzling white. We don't see the Source of the light, only what the light touches and changes. We understand that the source of this light is holy, and that it provides a window in time to something timeless. Jesus' spiritual ancestors, Moses and Elijah, have died centuries ago, but here they are, in the present. Peter, James, and John glimpse Jesus and their spiritual ancestors; they glimpse Eternity in a person. At first, they are in awe, but their astonishment quickly turns to fear. What if this glorious vision vanishes as quickly as it came? What if they can't hold on to it? Peter wants to capture the moment by building three dwelling places. He wants to make Jesus' radiant presence, and the presence of Moses and Elijah, permanent, safe, and solid.

Buddhists speak of impermanence and how insight into impermanence is a glimpse into eternity. But they often don't tell you that when you realize that everything is passing – including what, and who, you love – you'll get scared. It's not a good marketing tool. ☺

I'm reminded of a moment *some years ago* when I was on a Buddhist-Christian dialogue retreat with the Dalai Lama and Fr. Lawrence Freeman, a Benedictine monk. One morning we all *received a glimpse* of something beautiful-that was immediately snatched away. We were a group of about 40 people, traveling by bus and train from Delhi to Varanasi and Bodh Gaya, and back again to Delhi. On one occasion we spent the whole night bumping along on a bus, and finally arrived at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram about 5 o'clock in the morning. The sun was just coming through the surrounding trees. We were tired, hungry, and happy to arrive at long last at the high brick walls and iron fence that surrounded the ashram. At Fr. Freeman's invitation, we

all stumbled out of the bus. An old man in white robes walked toward Fr. Freeman, and welcomed him as the rest of us gathered around.

They chatted for a moment, and then the old man said, “Oh, would you like some breakfast?”

Fr. Freeman looked around, smiled with relief and replied, “Yes, yes, that would be wonderful!”

“Oh,” the old man said, “I’m sorry, that will not be possible.” [with Indian accent]

Impermanence can happen very quickly. The clouds open to something glorious, and close, and open again, as long as we live. It seems that nothing in this passing, material world can satisfy our longing to be happy, fulfilled and safe for very long. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to love and be loved unconditionally – and forever? Well, let’s consider the transfiguration of Jesus. Peter, James, and John had their *forever* moment, and then it was over. When we read their story, we might feel sorry for Jesus’ friends, but we might also feel sorry for ourselves, too – we weren’t even there! This event took place a long time ago, a once-in-a-lifetime experience that we’ll never have.

But consider this: if Jesus’ transfiguration was indeed something eternal, then it *isn’t* over. Anything eternal is, by definition, taking place forever. Which means that it is happening right now. We can imagine someone being so alive, so present and awake, that he, or she, shines with a transfiguring light. The light of transfiguration is shining among us now, and it’s shining all around us, too – out of the trees, the ocean, the rivers and land of the natural world. This light is woven in love, and even the horrors of climate change, species extinction and human-on-human violence can’t destroy it. When our eyes and heart are open, we understand something that the philosopher Gabriel Marcel once said: “You know you really love someone, when you glimpse in them something that is too beautiful to die.”

God’s eternal presence is not bound by clock-time. Everything that passes through the Spirit’s transfiguring light – including this blessed day – will disappear. But Eternity does not pass. It’s right here with us now, shining in Ute’s and Mark’s faces, and in yours. Are we willing to open ourselves to that light moment by moment or will we close down and succumb to the voice “*Oh, that will not be possible*”? It’s the Holy Spirit that transfigured Jesus, because he was open to the Spirit’s presence, and it’s the Spirit that transfigures you and transfigures me.

We can't make the Spirit appear by our own ego-efforts – we don't know where She comes from or where She's going. But we can, in each moment, open our hearts and minds and be available to receive the gift when She comes.

Now I know you may be telling yourself: transfiguration is only for Jesus, or for mystics and saints, but not for me. That's what I, at least, used to think. I grew up as a Lutheran Christian in northern Wisconsin. I was taught that Jesus was *totally* different from me. He was the Son of God, and I was not. It wasn't until later that I learned that Jesus gives away his specialness to all of us. One of my dear mentors and friends was Fr. Henri Nouwen. He would often say, "Jesus' story is our story." Like Jesus, we are utterly loved by God, and like Jesus we are sent here to manifest the love of God. Like Jesus, we suffer, and, like Jesus, we will die. But like Jesus, we are immortal. Eternal life doesn't come later, if we're good. Eternal life is now. When Jesus knew that his life was almost over, he told his friends, "My joy is yours; what's mine is yours." In fact, he declared, "I am in you, you are in me, and we are forever in God." Jesus saw that his friends were longing for a love that never passes, and he basically told them, "That will definitely be possible."

Everything changes if we trust the touch, the glimpse of this transfiguring light. Too often we miss the light. Why? Because we're too busy; we're too focused on ourselves; we're moving too fast. What I've learned is that if we want to be open to the transfiguring light, we have to slow down occasionally, and even stop. We have to pay attention to the present moment. We have to be more curious and more observant about what's going on, here and now. We are sitting here at the windowsill of time and eternity, as a sacred luminescence rises over the land.

What we glimpse through this window will never pass. When we attune our hearts to eternity, we trust that this moment and this day spans past, present and future and can heal the past and bless the future. St. Augustine once wrote that our deepest identity is forever because we are created out of God's love, and that this love is everlasting. But Augustine also warned that we can't know the light and love of God if our minds are stuck in the past or wandering into the future. What he noticed 1600 years ago in his book, *Confessions*, is true today. To use the Buddhist image, our minds are like a tree full of monkeys: our thoughts tend to dart about. The continuous flood of internet news and entertainment steals our attention away from the present. If we are to glimpse the timeless light we must discipline our minds to be present. Augustine

wrote that ‘There *are* three times – a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.’”¹

As you look ahead into the future of this community, of course you can expect some times of challenge and disappointment, some periods of disagreement. But you don’t need to get caught on the dizzying train of clock-time. What really matters and what really lasts is the presence of the Beloved within us, in each other, and in our natural world – because that love is eternal. A Buddhist teacher once asked me, “What was your face before you were born?” And Henri Nouwen would proclaim, “You were the apple of God’s eye before you were born.” Belovedness is always presencing itself in our hearts, if we open to it in every moment. The life of Christ is a continual re-attunement to eternal presence in each moment. **Like Jesus, we walk in eternity, and the river of time is passing through us.**

We can’t, by our own power, hold on to this beautiful day and make it last forever. It will pass. But somehow, everything and everyone we see right now is transparent to the eternity of God’s presence.

(You know,) as a boy I was fascinated by Superman’s ability to see through walls with his X-ray vision. It turns out that we actually *have* that vision! When we see with the eye of the heart, we see eternity in all things. We awaken to what the medieval Dominican monk, Meister Eckhart, once said, “The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me.” When we see clearly, we are also seen.

This spiritual practice is challenging because we normally want to stop time when things are going well, and to speed up time when things are going badly. The trick is to let time move through us without either holding on to the pleasure or pushing away the pain. The trick is to live with open hands and an open heart. William Blake puts it like this, in his poem “Eternity”: “He who binds to himself a joy/Does the winged life destroy/He who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in eternity’s sunrise.” You know, this is difficult. We want to hang on to things, to make time stop, to have more time. But time is always passing into eternity. And eternity is nothing to fear. The Shambhala Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa recognized this when he said, “The bad news is that we’re falling. The good news is that there is no bottom.”

¹ St. Augustine. The Confessions of St. Augustine. Trans. Rex Warner. N.Y.: New American Library, 1963, 265, 273.

In the Christian community we describe the experience of falling without a “bottom” as perpetually falling into the arms of love, the arms of God. Nothing is solid, and so we fall, but God is always catching us as we fall. So we can stop trying to hold on so tightly – to possess our lives, to accumulate stuff, to keep figuring things out, to prove we’re right – and simply let go and fall into the embrace of the God who is sustaining us in every moment.

Here’s another way to look at it: we live at *the crossroad* of time and eternity. That’s why some of us make the sign of the cross: the vertical line represents our eternal life, and the horizontal line represents our chronological, mortal life. Like Jesus, we are 100% eternal and 100% mortal. We are each created in the image and likeness of God. And we must help each other to remember this.

That’s why you called Ute to guide this community: she is here to remind you of who you really are. An unconditional love circulates in your heart. Jesus’ story is your story. You don’t have to figure it out or make it happen. It just is. Together, in this community, you can help each other to remember that each of you is a unique person, yet each of you is also a window into a holy, timeless Eternity. You are a light.

I’ll close with a story. In the very early years of the Church there was a desert monk named Macarius of Egypt. He was sometimes called The Lamp of the Desert. It is said that St. Macarius’ heart was so full of love, and his face shown with such an eternal light, that he would glow in the dark. Eventually his monastery became known as “the glowing lantern of the wilderness” or “the glowing monastery.” My prayer is that this community will be a lamp in Camden, a lamp in Maine. The light of God is already shining in your hearts. May it break forth, like the dawn! *It is very possible!* ☺ [again, the Indian accent]

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