

The Transfiguration of the Lord

Sunday, August 6, 2017, Year A

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Today would have been the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time, but being August 6 the Transfiguration of the Lord takes precedence. Why does this feast rank as it does? Maybe because of the important theme of death and resurrection. You've heard of Christmas in July. Well, we could call this Easter in August.

So, where is the resurrection theme? In Matthew's Gospel, six days before the Transfiguration Jesus tells his disciples that he must be put to death and rise again. They are shocked. To reassure them he takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain and shows them his glory.

Notice the similarity between his appearance transfigured and that of God in today's reading from Daniel. Brilliant, unearthly light pours out of them. And who is speaking with Jesus? Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, the entire Old Covenant that had prepared the way for Christ. Luke tells us that they were speaking with Jesus about the exodus he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem, meaning his death and resurrection. Then, on the way back down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone until he has risen from the dead. So, yes, death and resurrection runs through the transfiguration like a freight train. You could indeed call this Easter in August.

Which puts me on a train of thought. Come along! We are pulling out of Mt. Tabor station around 32 AD with visions of Christ in glory fresh in our minds, Jesus bright as the sun, streams of fire surging out from the throne of God. We head north along the Mediterranean coast, west through Asia Minor, and south into Greece to Corinth, where it's about 56 AD, and the Christians in town have just received a letter from St. Paul.

He talks about various matters and then, in chapter 15, calls Jesus "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep". (1 Cor. 15:20) If he is the first fruits, we who belong to him are the harvest to follow. We are all meant to share the glory of the risen Lord.

And we'll all shine on, like the moon and the stars and the sun. And we'll all shine on...." not because of karma, instant or otherwise, but because we are made in the image of God, an image that Christ has redeemed, with a destiny of glory that he has restored to us by accomplishing it himself.

Because of Christ we will all rise again.

This sets up a question which Paul asks rhetorically:

"But someone may say, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they

come back?”

Being St. Paul he begins his answer by saying, “You fool!” But then he gets to business with an analogy. A seed has a certain kind of body, and the full grown plant has a different kind of body, yet it's the same plant. The same plant, at different stages of life, has a different kind of body.

So also with the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown corruptible, it is raised incorruptible. It is sown weak, it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. The analogy helps a little, but you might be left wondering what a “spiritual body” might be.

Paul goes on, with a passage made familiar to music lovers by Handel's “Messiah”:

“Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised, and we shall be changed.”

So, on the last day, when the dead are raised, people alive at the time will transition directly from a mortal to an immortal existence, from a physical to a spiritual body. You may still be wondering about that spiritual body, but what an amazing thing to be what we are, with the destiny we have, from the hand of a loving God.

But think about it on the train because – “All aboard!”-- we've leaving Corinth and heading northwest up through the Balkans into the mountains of beautiful Switzerland where we disembark in the capital of Bern. It is 1905, and as we stroll through the town we come upon the Federal Office for Intellectual Property. Inside we find a new patent clerk by the name of Einstein with his feet up on his desk and a faraway look in his eye.

Suddenly he sits up and shouts, “Eureka! $E=mc^2!$ ” which is his way of saying that energy and mass, what we might simply call matter, are convertible, each to the other. In fact, matter is an extremely condensed form of energy. This would seem to imply that everything, even those solid- looking mountains ringing the town, is energy. The revolution in physics that Einstein kicked off has produced even weirder discoveries about the nature of the universe. For instance, at the size-range of an individual atom “every bit of matter and energy exists in a state of blurry flux, allowing it to occupy an infinite number of locations simultaneously.”

(Tim Folger, “If An Electron Can Be In Two Places at Once, Why Can't You?”
Discover Magazine.com, June 2015)

So if protons and electrons aren't really the nice neat particles you thought they were, occupying a definite space and time, because so-called particles of matter are really manifestations of energy, what is energy? The science book definition is “the capacity

to do work”, which makes energy sound like some feature of matter, but if matter is a form of energy we seem to be going around in a circle: energy and matter being different forms of the same thing. But what is that thing?

Can there be, must there be, some kind of “source energy” apart from, independent of, and prior to the universe? An infinite, eternal energy that is the source of the universe, permeates it throughout, and sustains it in existence? Could it be that the energy making up the carbon, calcium, oxygen and hydrogen of my physical body could be released from its material form yet persist in the pattern that makes me a living, conscious person-- a spiritual body? (The theologians say that the soul is the form of the body.)

Think about that on the train because – all aboard! -- We are off to our last stop: Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, arriving on March 18, 1958.

Remember Thomas Merton, that college student who was wasting himself in New York night clubs engaged in an “animal travesty of mysticism”, seeking the transcendent God through booze, tobacco, and storms of jazz?

Well, he gave up the animal travesty and went straight for the transcendence, as a Trappist monk at Gethsemani Abbey, about forty miles south of Louisville. He's in town today on monastery business. In fact that's him standing on the corner, among many other people going about their business, when, suddenly, he... well, let him tell it.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.”

“It is a glorious thing to be a member of the human race, though it is dedicated to many absurdities and makes many terrible mistakes. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. If only everyone could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

(Thomas Merton, “Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander”, P. 140, 141)

No way to tell them, but if we take some time each day to enter into the monastery of our own hearts, where silence reigns and God resides, sometimes we see it for ourselves.