

Transfiguration: The Mystery, Terror, and Fascination of the Holy

A Sermon for St. John's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis by The Rev. Craig Lemming
Sunday, February 11, 2018 – The Last Sunday After Epiphany

It was the year 2001. I was 19 years old and it was my first year in America, worlds away from my home in Zimbabwe. During the bitter mid-winter at New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, my trombonist roommate, Nate, who played in the Conservatory Orchestra, invited me to hear a rehearsal of Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony.¹ Nate knew that I was terribly depressed: the sunshine, warmth, and beauty in my Zimbabwean blood had grown tepid as I struggled through my first New England winter. I half-heartedly accepted Nate's gracious invitation, and after forcing down yet another bland cafeteria supper – the furthest thing from my mother's scrumptious Cape Malay cooking – I dragged myself listlessly into Jordan Hall and sat alone in the balcony to listen to the rehearsal. The orchestra played only a few phrases when the conductor threw down his baton and yelled, "No! No! No! Don't you realize that you have a gift to transform lives! You are musicians: physicians of the human soul! Don't you realize that music has the power to change humanity? *Every* phrase you play has the potential to transform the very substance of a person!" The rehearsal resumed, but what happened in the moments of music that followed the conductor's outburst, was inexplicable.

¹ <https://youtu.be/Vu39WtDJ-CQ>

As I sat in the dank pit of my bitter gloom, out of nowhere, souring high upon the blazing notes of that terrifying opening trumpet solo of Mahler's Fifth Symphony, the Apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians came crashing into my very being:

Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.²

By the end of the rehearsal I sat in silence, weeping with joy in the shadows of that cold balcony. I was completely changed. The substance of my being was transformed by Mahler's music and by those revelatory words of the Apostle Paul. I was like the water that Christ transformed into the finest wine at the Wedding Feast in Cana; a holy mystery captured in the words of metaphysical poet Richard Crashaw: **"The conscious water saw its God, and blushed."**³

I believe this is the closest I have come to experiencing some small semblance of what Peter, James, and John encountered at the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. Their terror, their awe, and their utter beguilement are felt in the silences between the sentences of this strange story. What do we do with the mystical truth at the heart of this account? I find our all-too-human response to

² 1 Corinthians 15:51-55 (NRSV).

³ Richard Crashaw, *Epigrammata Sacra, Aquae in Vinum Versae* in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (3rd ed.; Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 1980), 169.

an inexplicable encounter with the Holy is captured in Peter's reaction to Christ's Transfiguration. I believe that Peter experienced what German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto illuminates in his book, *Idea of the Holy*.⁴ Rudolf Otto is best known for his analysis of the experience that, in his view, underlies all religion. He called this experience "numinous," and discovered that this numinous experience of the Holy has three interconnected components. He designated them with a Latin phrase: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. As *mysterium*, the numinous is "wholly other" – entirely foreign to anything we experience in ordinary life. It evokes a response of silence. The numinous is also a *mysterium tremendum*. It provokes terror because the Holy presents itself in the form of overwhelming power. And the numinous also presents itself as *fascinans*, as an all-consuming fascination with the Holy One who is merciful and gracious.⁵ Peter's encounter with the Holy mystery of Christ's Transfiguration is entirely outside of his ordinary life experience. With James and John, Peter's only adequate response to this terrifying mystery is silence, for we read that **"[Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified."**⁶ And the *mysterium fascinans* – Peter's all-

⁴ Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy* (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁵ This summary of Rudolf Otto's explication of the numinous is adapted from this source: <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln101/Otto.htm>

⁶ Mark 9:6.

consuming fascination with the Holy is entirely believable when his immediate desire is to build three dwelling places for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah respectively.⁷ Peter's futile attempt to contain, to domesticate, or to preserve this transcendent Holy mystery, with which he is utterly fascinated, is all too-human. It is the reason behind our compulsion for capturing moments of beauty on digital screens which sometimes rob us of actually being fully present to experiencing breathtaking revelations. Peter's compulsion to capture the Transcendent is the same compulsion that drove me to walk for half-an-hour from the concert hall that cold winter evening years ago, to my favorite used record store to purchase Mahler's Fifth Symphony. But, of course, after listening to it literally hundreds of times, no recording will ever fully capture what happened in that timeless, sweet hour, when I was 19 and I wept with joy all alone in that cold balcony of Jordan Hall, utterly consumed by the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of the Holy.

We have arrived at the Last Sunday after Epiphany. We have journeyed together as witnesses of the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist; Jesus' calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him; Jesus' healing of the man with an unclean spirit; the resurrection of Peter's mother-in-law; and now we have arrived at the mountaintop of The Transfiguration. It is in this moment of

⁷ Mark 9:5.

unspeakable awe that we prepare for our journey into the Season of Lent. This Wednesday, the imposition of ashes upon our foreheads symbolizes our renewed commitment to journey into the wilderness places in our hearts; to turn away from distorted relationships with ourselves, with others, with Creation, and with God; to choose forgiveness, to welcome God's healing presence in our lives, and to be reconciled with our True Self. Lent is the season to be still and know that the Transfigured Christ who dwells within each of us is our True Self. We need only let the dazzling light of Christ – in whom the Law of Moses and the Prophetic Witness of Elijah intersect – shine freely in our hearts. When we, as living members of the Body of Christ, love ourselves radically, love our neighbors radically, and love God radically we become Christ's dazzling Transfiguration of the "all the Law and the Prophets."⁸ We have the gift that conductor yelled about in that rehearsal of Mahler's Fifth Symphony: we have the gift of the Transfigured Christ radiating within each of us. When we share Christ's gift of extravagant love we reveal the Holy to those who are unloved, brokenhearted, forgotten, and alone. The *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of the Holy changes everything. In that Holy mystery, terror, and fascination we experience when we embrace the fully human and fully divine Christ who dwells eternally in all people, we shall be changed – in

⁸ Matthew 22:40.

a moment in the twinkling of an eye. We need only surrender to that ever-present, Holy Mystery to become who we are. Free. I close now with the words of

Toni Morrison:

At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint or even remember it. It is enough. No record of it needs to be kept and you don't need someone to share it with or tell it to. When that happens — that letting go — you let go because you can.⁹

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 242.