SERMONS THAT WORK

Transfiguration

Freedom
RCL: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99 or 99:5-9; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,
O thou of God and man the Son;
thee will I cherish, thee will I honor,
thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown.

Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moonlight,
and all the twinkling, starry host:
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer,
than all the angels heaven can boast.

When Jesus was transfigured before his disciples, was he indeed the fairest? Was his, in that fleeting yet indelible moment, the most beautiful of all bodies?

For many of us, steeped in the artistic images and songs of the western church tradition, the intuitive answer would seem to be, "yes, of course." Jesus is God Incarnate, after all. Surely his glorious body, infused with blazing light on the mountaintop, is the loveliest of all imaginable sights.

Or is it?

Beauty is a complex thing, and we are at a moment in our time and culture that is ripe for reckoning with how we speak of the aesthetic dimensions of the holy. Contemporary dialogue about the worth and dignity of certain bodies over others is revealing anew the pervasive influence of our unspoken assumptions about what (and who) is beautiful and what (and who) is not. It might even be said that in the west, we live in a society burdened by the tyranny of beauty—a worldview that equates physical perfection with the greatest experience of human potential.

We need not look far to find evidence of this. Open up the pages of a glossy magazine or scroll through the airbrushed cavalcade of images on social media, each one showing someone claiming to be just a little bit more accomplished or happy or appealing than you are. Note all of the promises of modern marketing

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

that you will be *satisfied*, that you will be *whole*, if only you will buy this thing, achieve this status, correct this physical flaw.

All around us, in ways subtle and not-so-subtle, value is centered on certain physical standards of "beauty." Some of these are personal, enfleshed: skin color, body shape and size, ability, age, gender identity, nationality. Others, though, are institutional: membership numbers, average Sunday attendance, followers, financial ledgers, cultural influence, political power. The church is not immune from these tendencies. Indeed, the mainline church's longing for its former wealth and prestige is but one manifestation of this servitude to the aesthetic, a single-minded fixation on the mighty Jesus of the mountaintop rather than the humbler manifestations of his day-to-day existence in the valleys and backstreets where he was most often found.

In all of this, there is the tacit acceptance of a certain standard of perfection that is wielded against the different, the marginal, and the vulnerable. That which is beautiful is seen as more "real" and thus as having more value than the squalid and the broken realities of our lives. In the personal and the corporate experiences of this tyranny of the beautiful, there is an underlying assumption that up there, enshrouded in the clouds, a perfected version of our presently imperfect, unacceptable body is tantalizingly within grasp, if only we reach a little higher.

And so, if we say yes, in the Transfiguration, Jesus was indeed "fairest," we unwittingly subjugate ourselves and others to the idea that Christ's glory is the same as an imaginary physical perfection—a body that is bright and pure and unmarred by the messiness of life. But then, when we look at our own scars; at our own tender, hidden, mottled places; at our own sometimes intolerably plain reflections in the mirror, we can see only insufficiency. And we begin to believe that God is as far from us as the bright lights of a city we will never visit. And God's beauty becomes our despair.

But thankfully, this is not the Jesus we are actually given in the good news, even if it is the one we've spent centuries imagining.

If we listen attentively, we will notice that, in fact, "beautiful" is not a word any of the gospel writers use to describe the Transfiguration. "The appearance of his face changed," Luke simply tells us in today's passage, "and his clothes became dazzling white." The other texts in Mark and Matthew are similarly neutral. If anything, it is brightness, not beauty, that characterizes the nature of the Transfiguration, and it is terror and confusion, not pleasure or jubilation, that characterizes the reactions of those present. So however we might describe Jesus at that moment, imagining a prosaic sort of physical beauty is not an adequate approach. Thinking of him as overwhelming, or perhaps even frightening, is probably closer to the truth—like a person staring directly into the noonday sun.

Terror in the face of divine glory is, in fact, quite consistent in the Biblical tradition. As today's first reading from Exodus indicates, after he has communed with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses' shining face strikes *fear* into the hearts of the Israelites, not confidence or delight. This, too, is not an alluring vision of beauty. Instead,

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

the eventual veiling of Moses' face before the people suggests, in the same manner as the cloud that ultimately enfolds Jesus' disciples, that divine presence is not meant to be experienced directly by the senses. It is not adequate to call it beautiful, because it is not aesthetic—it is beyond our ability to receive or comprehend.

It is also, in Jesus' case, an incomplete rendering of God's self-disclosure. Unlike the Greek and Roman gods of mythology, who might be satisfied revealing themselves as figures of impressive beauty on the slopes of Mt. Olympus, our God, the God revealed in Christ, is not merely a God of Transfiguration, but of the Crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension as well. One cannot understand Christ without all of these facets: Jesus' nature as Lord of all creation has not, in fact, been fully revealed until he bears the hideous marks of Calvary, until he has inhabited and conquered the dirty, stifling tomb, and until he has poured out his Spirit upon all of our bruised, imperfect mortal flesh—until he has united himself with that flesh for all time. In the strange, inconceivable totality of Divine love, God is shown as the One who embraces ugliness and pain even more closely than majesty or beauty—if only to free us from the delusion that we are ruled by any of it.

Freedom, yes. Perhaps it is freedom, more than anything—more than beauty or terror—that we should receive from the Transfiguration account: how free God is to be more than we can understand; how free God is to shatter our categories of what is worthy and what is not; how free God desires us to be within the dazzling radiance of all-encompassing love, no matter how broken our bodies and our hearts.

Such freedom is startling, to be sure, and we are still learning how to bear it, how to trust in it. But it is also the gateway to true life—a life not reserved for the fairest and most beautiful alone, but for everything and everyone, reconciled at the last, beyond our imagining, by God's unfailing mercy.

The Rev. Phil Hooper *was ordained to the priesthood in 2019 and currently serves as Curate at Trinity Episcopal Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. A native of the west coast and a graduate of Church Divinity School of the Pacific (M.Div., 2019), he is passionate about spiritual formation, contemplative prayer, and the ways that these things impact our discipleship. Outside of church, you will likely find him in a local bookshop or on a road trip exploring the Midwest. His sermons and other writings are available at* www.byanotherroad.com.

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017