

Sermon on Luke 9:28-43a  
Transfiguration of Our Lord, February 14, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Today's task for preaching is no small matter: making sense of an indescribable mystery of faith called the *transfiguration of our Lord*. How can I describe the indescribable, or explain the unexplainable? Well, I've always loved a challenge, so here goes! Let me begin with a little test of your memory regarding a well-known animated film classic. In what movie did you hear these words: "*Mirror, mirror on the wall; who's the fairest of them all?*" – and who said them? Who knows the answer? If you guessed that the film is *Snow White* and the speaker is the Wicked Queen, you are right! Your animated film memory is just fine – so how's your biblical recall? Well, let's start with the movie!

Most of us use mirrors in our homes to see ourselves in reflection so that we can wash our face, comb our hair, shave or apply make-up. In *Snow White*, the Wicked Queen (who was also a sorceress) used a mirror not only to see her reflection, but to ask a question that most of us may only ask ourselves ("Am I beautiful? Am I the most beautiful in all the land?"). But this was a magic mirror, so the Queen could ask the question and a face appeared in the mirror which was not hers. Usually, the mirror answered her "Your majesty is fairest of them all", in all honesty. But then, as we all know, the mirror never lies! So one day the face in the mirror answered the Wicked Queen, that "You are the fairest in all the land but one. There is one person more fair than yourself, and that is, *Snow White!*" With that honest comment, the Queen fell into a furious rage, and vowed to destroy the only one more beautiful than her, and the real action of the film began.

I won't say more about the film – most of you know how it turns out. But it raises up a valuable point. Most of us look in the mirror to see our own reflection. It helps us see ourselves as others may see us, blemishes and all! But often when we look into a mirror we imagine ourselves looking different, perhaps even better than that reflection, and that's where mirror-gazing can become a problem! We might want to add more make-up, or change our appearance so that we can look more like a movie or rockstar, maybe even a beautiful model. We might even start thinking that we can look better than somebody else, more "beautiful" than our friends. Then we can get all messed up, and hurt both others and ourselves!

On the other hand, have you ever looked in the mirror and said, "I look like a child of God. I'm beautiful, because I am a child of God." Have you ever said that to your mirror? You should! Because that is what you are! I wish we had a mirror in every pew so that I could ask you to hold it in front of your face, look into that mirror and say, "I am wonderfully made. I am a child of God." So,

without looking into mirrors, let's just say that! Don't be afraid! Repeat after me: **I am wonderfully made. I am a child of God. I am beautiful, just as I am.** Because that is how God sees you and me, and that is the most important thing for any one of us to realize about ourselves.

Another question I wonder about. When you look in the mirror, do you ever say to yourself, "I am a reflection of Jesus Christ"? Because you are. You have been baptized in the name of Jesus (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Just as Jesus was a reflection of God the Father on this earth, so you and I are a reflection of Jesus our Lord in what we do and what we say; we are his hands and his feet on this earth today, as he is present within us and among us all. For we are Christ's Body, the Church.

So let's go back to the Bible text. Luke tells us that one day, just before he would commence his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus went up the mountain to pray, taking with him only Peter, James and John. And while Jesus was praying, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." Moses and Elijah appeared with him, talking to him. Now Peter, James and John were terrified because they now saw Jesus as God saw him, in all his glory.

Now, how do we explain this, which we call Jesus's "transfiguration" – the changing of his appearance to his disciples? We could say that Jesus at that moment of prayer reflected the glory of God on his face and clothing, meaning he shined with brilliant, glorious light. Just as a mirror reflects the image of our face in the glass, so Jesus reflected the image of God with his whole being. It was just at this moment, on the mountain in prayer, that these three disciples were blessed to see it. They saw Jesus in a new way, because God wanted to show them how this was his beloved Son, that they should listen to him. It was a gift, what one could call a "brief, and shining moment."

There is a scientific explanation to this. Adam Thomas, the curate of Trinity Episcopal Church in Martinsburg, West Virginia, wrote about this in his commentary on the text for *The Christian Century*. He wrote about how light gives us the ability to see, because light "breaks open when it shines on objects. Light reflects and refracts and absorbs in ways that allow us to discern shapes and movement." God created light first because without light the rest of creation would have no definition. For example, we can't see the moon at night without the light of the sun reflecting on it. But human beings see only a tiny fraction of all the light that God made – only a 300-nanometer piece of the whole spectrum of light – yet we persist in thinking that *only what we see exists!*

So, when Jesus went up that mountain, in the moment of the transfiguration Peter, James and John were able to see Jesus in a way they had never seen him before. They had received the gift of seeing Jesus as God sees Jesus, a glorious being of dazzling white light. Instead of reflecting the blues and reds and yellows

of the visible spectrum (which we call the *primary colors*), in his transfiguration Jesus reflects God and shows himself to be fully luminous. Jesus had opened the eyes of his disciples to see him for the first time in a new and glorious way.

Something like this had happened centuries ago when Moses had come down from Mount Sinai during the Exodus. Moses had been in the presence of God, and as he descended the mountain with the stone tablets of the Law in his hands, his appearance also had changed. Scripture says that “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” Again, Moses reflected the glory of God, having just been in God’s presence on the mountain. When Aaron and the Israelites saw Moses and his shining face, they were afraid to come near him. So Moses put on a veil to shield the people from his shining face when he spoke to them, and removed the veil when he spoke to God. Again, Moses and Jesus’s faces were shining because God saw them, and they reflected God’s glorious, luminous light.

Now, this is all very interesting, and helps us understand these scripture passages. But here’s even greater news: the Apostle Paul wrote to his friends in the church in Corinth that we can all reflect the glory of God ourselves, through faith! He said “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

Now, usually we are afraid as humans to be in the presence of God. We don’t like the light of God’s glory shining on us, exposing our imperfect lives and selves. We’d much rather remain in the shadows, and hide out (like Adam and Eve in the garden, once they discovered that they were naked!). So we put veils over our faces to keep ourselves from seeing God’s glory; we wear masks so that others don’t see us as we think we really are: sinners, imperfect beings with warts and blemishes – for that is what we see when we look at ourselves in the mirror. We apply more makeup, have plastic surgery or facelifts, and do extreme makeovers. It never works! But if we were to see ourselves as God sees us, through Jesus’ eyes, as God’s beloved children, and see the glory of God in ourselves and each other, we could remove our veils and take off our masks and live openly and honestly in the world as children of God, saints and sinners at the same time, each one of us saved by the loving grace of God. Because that’s the truth!

But there’s one more thing. Sometimes we think that the glory of God shines only in the holy places, in the Temple and on the mountain. We think the only place God’s glory shined on Jesus was on the mountain of the transfiguration. But look at the next paragraph of our text. After Jesus ordered his disciples to remain silent about what they had seen, they came down from that mountain. Jesus encountered a man who begged him to help his son, his only child, who was possessed by a demon, convulsing and foaming at the mouth. Jesus had

compassion on the man and his child, rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy. Everybody in crowd saw what Jesus had done, and were astounded at the greatness of God. In the healing of this boy, God's glory shined on Jesus and God's love was reflected in Jesus' act of mercy, showing God's power over unclean demonic spirits. But the glory wasn't seen in radiant, shining light on Jesus' face. It was shown in the mercy and compassion that Jesus showed for a suffering boy and his frantic father. Jesus reflected God in his mercy and healing, and the greatest glory of God was that which shined on Jesus as he died on the cross for us, and was raised from the dead to give us all life!

Sometimes we think that God is only present in the Church; that God's glory only shines for us in the most beautiful moments of worship, in the light shining through a stained glass window, or in the sounds of a hymn sung by congregation and choir. Yes, these can be glorious moments for us as a church. But most of the moments that God is present are not seen here in the church, but outside these walls, in our homes, on the streets, in our workplaces and schools. God's glory shines when human beings show mercy to one another in the name of Christ, when you and I forgive one another, or show compassion to those who are suffering. This is the true glory of God, and you and I can all reflect this glory in all that we say and do, even if others can't see it! For by faith in Jesus *you and I are being changed, we are being transformed into the image of God in Christ Jesus*, as we imitate him, and follow him as disciples. Then one day we, too, shall be totally transformed, maybe even transfigured ourselves, and our faces will shine with the glory of God! Then we shall all see ourselves and one another as God sees us, as God's beloved children, wonderfully and beautifully made. We won't have to say "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is fairest of them all!" For we shall all shine with the brightness of God's glory, when we stand before God's throne in heaven, where the Lord God will be our light. Until that day, we pray that our every thought, word, and deed will reflect the love, compassion and mercy of our Lord, said and done in the name of Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God.