

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, March 6, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Being Transfigured YOURSELF

The Scripture reading for today contains the very familiar TRANSFIGURATION STORY in which Jesus is “transfigured” before the very eyes of his closest friends and disciples—instantaneously changed from the familiar teacher and companion into the celestial radiance of the Lord of Heaven and earth. In a twinkling, the disciples witness the ordinary transformed into the eternal. Their eyes were opened to behold the greatest truth ever to be revealed...that Jesus is the One chosen of God to bring unity, harmony, and peace to all people...The One through whom the entire creation will be transformed and renewed. The Transfiguration is the last and greatest of those “epiphinal events and teachings” that we have been considering during this Church season of Epiphany that are intended to help us discover and live in the light of God’s truth.

You probably imagine that the Transfiguration is a miraculous once-in-a-lifetime, unique occurrence. Well, perhaps. But when you think about it a bit you will realize that there are lots of transformative things going on all the time. These are situations and occurrences that leave us transfigured because, through them, God’s presence and power shine out so dramatically and clearly. I’m thinking about baby Jac’s Baptism here in the Chapel. On that wonderful Sunday all of us saw first-hand the transformative power of love.

Another example of the present day power of transfiguration is the way this Chapel community has been built and has grown not just in numbers but in depth of ministry. The transforming of empty office space into the lively Program Center where we gather now each week for education and fellowship is, to me, a completely miraculous thing. The inviting warmth and uplifting color of that space lifts everyone’s spirits and clearly contributes to the sense of wonder and imagination that you can see in the eyes of our Sunday School children. They are caught up in the transfigurative power of the God who is making all things new.

Then, because we are lucky enough to be near the shores, there is the continuous panorama of sunrise and sunset over the marshes. Somehow each breathtaking display of nature has a way of being new. Obviously the natural world has been doing its things for millennia. The beaches and marshes have been out there all day long for centuries but when you’re standing there, really paying attention, you have the sense that this one is especially for you. The special light show that God offers absolutely transforms the sky and we mortals are permitted to witness a brief glimpse of eternity before our very eyes.

The Irish have captured this strange and beautiful experience of the ordinary being made eternal when they talk about “thin places.” They mean that there are times and circumstances and places where the distance between the heavenly and the ordinary are surprisingly and momentarily SHRUNK. We are permitted to see the essential and eternal with all the obscuring layers earthly shadow and clutter removed. For just a brief second one can comprehend in absolute clarity the way things REALLY ARE. These are the moments when we are most alive. These are

what has led someone to observe that life cannot be measured by how many breaths we take but, rather, by the moments that leave us breathless.

The Transfiguration story, as I said, whether you understand it as a literally factual and historical event or as a metaphorical sort of “enacted sermon” is about the way in which on rare occasions, the curtain is pulled aside and we recognize, however fleetingly, that appearance and reality generally are (1) very different and (2) it is possible through God’s grace to see beyond the superficial to the essential level. Finally, in one dazzling insight on the mountaintop, Peter “gets it”—this Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen One of God. Jesus cautions them to keep that news to themselves because what that means has yet to be defined—not the conquering hero, but the suffering servant.

The Transfiguration event is a hugely important starting point. It announces the real truth of who Jesus is. He is much more than a teacher, prophet, healer, and friend. Beyond all that “earthly veneer” is the Creator and Savior of the world. His dazzling appearance is meant to provide the disciples with God’s breakthrough clarification. No more questions; no more doubt. THIS is the ONE. The message is underlined. Everything shouts the news—the physical transformation of Jesus, the link to the fulfillment of Old Testament through Moses and Elijah—both the law and the prophets, and the actual Voice of God: “This is my beloved Son, my chosen one. Listen to him.”

Transfiguration is a wonderful, amazing event but it’s not a one-time curiosity. It’s actually the beginning of a continuing transformation of the ordinary into the HOLY.

And here’s the amazing message for this Sunday: The presence, and power, and pardon of Jesus is ready and able to transform YOU...right now, today.

When I was growing up, people sometimes spoke of “the end of the world as we know it.” They meant it in a negative sense—they meant that something terrible was going to change what they understood to be a good and benign world. They conveniently left out the fact that “the world as we know it” actually needs a **whole lot** of changing. All our wars and want and walls have to be destroyed if the world is to resemble the celestial unity and harmony that are depicted in the Song of the Angels that accompanied the birth of Jesus. God calls us to join in bringing about the end of the world as we know it so that, in the future, as Handel’s Messiah so beautifully sings the dream, it might be transformed into “the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.”

That’s a tall order and a long-term goal. Nothing less will move Transfiguration from something long-ago and forgotten to a here-and-now **transformation of EVERYTHING**.

What a transfiguration that will be!