

Sermon by The Rev. David R. Hackett
Last Sunday After the Epiphany
February 14, 2010

The story is told of a little girl who was busily drawing a picture when her big brother walked by. "What are you drawing?" he asked. "God" was her answer. With the condescension only a big brother can give to a little sister, he said, "No one knows what God looks like!" To which she replied, "They will when I'm finished."

In one sense big brother was right: no one know what God looks like. But, like the little girl, people through time have attempted to describe God. From the Greeks we get attributes such as omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. From the Hebrews we get characteristic functions such as creator, judge, and law-giver.

The central assertion of the Christian faith is that God has drawn his own picture; drawn it in a human life which allows us to see and begin to comprehend, because our God comes to us in familiar terms. Christianity speaks of "God in Christ", a revelation, a showing forth: God revealing himself in Jesus.

I realize this is Valentine's Day. I hope you aren't too disappointed to learn that I'm not going to preach about St. Valentine or the many practices associated with his day. However, this is also the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, the season of "showing forth". And that's what I want us to think about during this sermon.

We begin Lent this Wednesday and we then begin to focus on the suffering and death of Jesus. But all of his life, his suffering, his death, his resurrection was an epiphany: God drawing his own picture. The season of Epiphany begins with the baptism of our Lord in the river Jordan and the voice from heaven is heard, "You are my beloved son." The season concludes today with the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, and once again the voice from heaven is heard, "This is my son, my Chosen, listen to him." The season begins with God declaring Jesus' sonship. It ends with God declaring Jesus' sonship.

The theologian Helmut Thieleke once said he suspected that at the Transfiguration nothing about Jesus changed. What changed was the capacity of the disciples to see him as he really was. The Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain showed forth to Peter, James, and John that Jesus was divine. They, in turn, told the other disciples; and they, in turn, down through the ages have told other followers; and they have told us.

At the same time, God was not only revealing something about himself, he was revealing something about us. Jesus was fully human. We must never forget that. Jesus was representative humanity. And what Peter, James, and John saw on that day was nothing less that the divine in the human. The Transfiguration is the acting out of the doctrine that the human person is, in essence, a creature touched by the divine. And that divinity is at the very heart of our being. Just as Jesus was being transformed into a radiant and beautiful being, we, too, are fundamentally radiant and beautiful.

Let me repeat that: *we are fundamentally radiant and beautiful*. Now, isn't that something to think about! Most of the time I certainly don't think of myself, or others, that way. I'm sure you don't either. You and I are so prone to think the worst of ourselves and the worst of others. We live in a world that often brings out the worst in us rather than the best in us. We live in a world racked by cruelty, distorted by ignorance and selfishness. In a world of unbelievable greed and corruption that has contributed to this recession we're in; in a world in which our nation is embroiled in two wars; in a world in which 230,000 Haitians died in the earthquake; in a world in which one out of five of the children here in our country live in poverty; in this world the Transfiguration stands as a symbol of hope and encouragement.

The apostles saw Jesus transfigured. And it transfigured, transformed their lives. In this story Holy Scripture is telling us who we really are. We are creatures of God who are created good, made in God's likeness, participants with God in the creation.

But in this world we live in today we need to hear that truth in different ways to truly hear it. You and I need to be told by another person that we are good and loved and accepted. We need to be told that truth by a friend, a parent, a child, a spouse, a partner. Because all too often what we hear is not good news. All too often we are shaped by the negative rather than the positive.

I'll never forget standing in a supermarket checkout line. A little boy of about six accidentally turned over a display rack. And his mother screamed at him, "Damn you! Can't you do anything right?" What damage was done to that child that day? What scars were inflicted that will last a lifetime?

Your heavenly parent is not saying, "Damn you!" God is saying, "I love you." God is saying, "You mess up, sure; but that doesn't mean I don't love you."

Now, I'll tip my hat to Valentine's Day. How many times have you heard someone ask the question about a couple in love with one another, "What does he see in her?" Or, as I'm sure my in-laws wondered, "What does she see in him?" Only the one who loves can truly answer. The old saying, "Love is blind", is right. Love *is* blind...to many imperfections, because love sees to the heart.

If that is true of human love then what of divine love? God, who is love, looks at you, into your heart, beyond the mask you might wear to keep others out, *and you are transfigured*. God sees you as his child, the beloved. Don't you wish everyone could see you that way? Don't you wish everybody remembered and knew who you really are?

That wonderful old hymn, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, contains a line that is sung, without many of us pausing to think of what is being said, "Christ was born across the sea with a glory in his bosom which transfigures you and me." That's an old-fashioned way of stating the truth that the glory that transfigures, that changes you and me is the love of God in Christ. Peter, James, and John heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my son." Everyone of you has your heavenly father saying to you, "This is my child." That's who you really are.

In a recent book, Miroslav Volf, Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, urges us to a new way of seeing others. And it is nothing less than seeing others in God. Volf reminds us that St. Augustine urged us to love our neighbor *through* God. It can't be done otherwise.

Try this: think of God the Father looking at you through Jesus. Do you know that is why I so often give you the Host, the Eucharistic Bread, the way I do? I am not only showing the Host to you as I say, "The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven." I am looking at you through Christ. And that makes all the difference in the way I see you.

Think of God the Father looking at us through Christ, as though the spectacles, the eye glasses of faith were Jesus. And through those redeeming, saving eyes you are seen as acceptable, seen as loveable. *You are transfigured!*

Now, begin to look at others that way. Begin to look at people as your brothers and sisters, wherever they are and whoever they are, and see them as God sees them: *transfigured, transformed, the beloved children of God*.

In 1982 Mother Teresa was awarded an honorary degree from Georgetown University. The mighty little saint, clothed in her trademark, blue-trimmed white sari and blue sweater, and through whom the light of Christ shone so brightly, ended her acceptance speech with the simple and yet profound message of the Transfiguration, "*Don't be afraid. God loves you. You are precious to Him. He says, 'I called you by your name. You are mine. Water cannot drown you. Fire will not burn you. You are precious to me. I love you.'*"

Amen.