

**“Revealing the Gravitas of God” based on 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 and Luke 9:28-36
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 27, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Two years ago, at the beginning of the pandemic, amid real tensions in our world, in an online forum for pastors and Presbyterian leaders, a colleague asked innocently, ‘How will you be celebrating the Baptism of the Lord this coming Sunday?’

A seminary professor responded incredulously, ‘The world is poised on the brink of disaster, and this is what you are thinking about?’ And many of us responded then, ‘Yes, this is exactly what we are thinking about.’

Our reasoning was not to dismiss the real perils of the world in which we live, but to say this ‘hot mess of a world,’ (as one pastor I went to seminary with put it) is the same world into which Jesus came to reconcile all things in him. And so, here we are, two years later, in this hot mess of a world, facing tensions greater than those even just two years ago, as now a war of aggression has begun in Europe and civilians are being attacked and killed, at the command of an insatiable tyrant, fueled by the idol of worldly power.

And once again, I see a holy day on the calendar in this season after the Epiphany, and rather than feed those feelings of despair we get when seeing images of war, I am choosing to look to the image of our Lord Jesus Christ, shining in glory. I do not do this in order to help myself ignore the world around me. No, instead, I do this because the veil has been lifted and it reveals God’s glory. It reveals it in the faces of those who are suffering and dying. I want us to see God’s glory, the reflection of Christ, who is our image of God, who suffered for us, who died for us, our Lord hanged on a tree, within this ‘hot mess’ of a world.

The Greek in Luke’s gospel is beautiful. It is an indication that it may have been his native language. He writes consistently, carrying his themes within his word choices, and today’s reading touches on two of those themes – prayer and liberation. Luke is specific to say that Jesus went up on the mountain to pray. Prayer in its simplest form is presenting ourselves to God, placing ourselves in the view of God, in conversation.

Prayer is then part of the eternal life of the Triune God. The Father and Son know and love each other, and present themselves before each other, conversing in and through the Holy Spirit. When we read in scripture about Jesus praying for us, or that the Holy Spirit is praying for us, it can seem confusing and is one of the difficulties in understanding the Triune God. But this is part of what the Trinity does – it prays.

This matters because in Jesus we see both the Son in the Trinity and a fellow human being just like us, the embodiment of God in the physical limitations that you and I share every day. Prayer then is the primary means by which we share in the life and work of God. By the Son presenting himself in our form before the Father and Spirit, so then, the veil is lifted as Paul says, and the Holy Spirit is in us and among us, giving us access direct to God in the Spirit through Jesus.

Then, within the transfiguration, Luke gives us something that no other account gives us. It’s in all four gospels, but it is Luke who tells us what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about on

that mountain. The word which Luke uses is a word that means 'departure,' a 'going out.' And in most bibles, this is how it is rendered, 'they spoke of his departure,' but the King James put it bluntly, interpreting it as, 'his decease.' In the translation read to you today, it said the literal, 'his exodus.' Luke tells us that Jesus and these two great prophets, talked about Jesus's death, his departure, the new exodus, like Israel out of Egypt, a passing through, an escape from the powers of this world into a promised land.

Sisters and brothers, what the transfiguration reveals for us is the glory of our Lord Jesus, and through him, it reveals the glory of God – Father, Son, and Spirit – in its fullness. But this glory is not the glory of a distant and unknowable, untouchable deity, who desires flattering words and grand gestures, like a despotic king. The glory of a personal and relational God, a glory of gravitas, the dignity, seriousness, and solemnity of a divine being, who has been through the wringer in solidarity with us, and who gets our attention not by authoritarian commands, but by presence and self-giving love. This is the glory of God, that love, a love without filter or veil, that shines for us and in us.

There is light for us to see, even as the clouds of war that do all they can to block the light. When we proclaim Jesus to be the glory of the One True God, born in our human limits, we are made able to see every human being we encounter as bearing his image. By this, we can take off the veil and speak with freedom, as equals to one another and amazingly to God. This is just as how the Messiah stood among us, as an equal. He humbled himself to be like us. The One for which there is no equal, shared in our humanity, so that we might know him and by grace, share in his abundant and eternal life. This is a status we do not deserve.

We live in an age of ideological narcissism. The world teaches us to gaze only at ourselves. When we look at others, we do not look for the reflection of Christ's image in others, but we make objects of one another, saying things like, 'That's my teammate. They are on my side.' Or we say, someone is 'useful' to us, as though they are a tool by which we can accomplish our goals. And sometimes, we treat people as toys for us to play with. We are trained by this world's order to look at others, and see only ourselves, our interests, our ideas, our desires, and so, we retreat to our echo chambers, places where we listen to and see only ourselves.

The truth is that this kind of ideological narcissism does nothing to reveal God's glory. No matter how much we might think we are good and holy and right about everything, it is a veil that we place over our own faces, to cover up who we really are, and to avoid looking at who God really is in the face of someone else. This veil is removed only by the Messiah, and so we must look for him, not merely in the pages of this book which reveals him, though scripture is vitally important to this. But look also but in the people we encounter each and every day.

The scriptures are meant to assure us now, and push us out into the world around us to share in the reconciliation of all, in and through Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God in our flesh. And so, we hold on to the transfiguration, not as Peter tried to, with tents to dwell only there, but as our reminder that love came down in Christ, and by him, the Spirit proceeds to us. We do not need to see the tragedy of this world and fear it, for God is with us. But at the same time, we

cannot just accept it, we cannot resign ourselves, by thinking that this is just the way it is, that nothing can change. The exodus of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt's empire, and the exodus of Judah out of exile and home again, and the exodus of Jesus out of the grasp of sin, and the death that comes with it, all point to God's activity in this world and God's ultimate glory, and the power to set us free.

The world that God entered in Jesus was a dangerous place, filled with war and suffering. The Caesar's of Ancient Rome have a lot in common with Vladimir Putin, in their naked pursuit of power and fierce belief in their cultural superiority. Emperors justify their actions of war in the name of peace, then and now. The tree in the Garden of Eden teaches this us about ourselves: We all want to control the narrative of what is good and evil. It says we are bent on controlling knowledge of good and evil, rather than just looking to Jesus.

God made this world and called it good. It is good and God's glory is found in all of it. Remember that the people of Russia and Ukraine are part of that good creation. When we see evil at its worst, it is easy to lose heart, and lose hope. We are tempted to doubt God and miss God's glory in others. We are tempted to walk away from our hope, faith and love. My sisters and brothers, hear me this morning, I want to encourage you to hold on.

Know that you share in the belovedness of God. You're part of God's plan in this world. In everything we start with prayer, and this is the biblical tradition we hold. We present ourselves to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit present themselves to each other and talk. The difference is that they are of one will, but we are trying to join our will to God's.

One of those ways to align with God's will is lament. Too often we shy away from this because we think that God is God and we are not supposed to, as if our challenges to God and expressions of frustration are not already known to God. It is ok to express our frustration with this world as it is, and even with God. This is the world into which God entered, where the Spirit remains, calling out at our sides with all of creation on our behalf with all of creation. The veil is lifted in Christ. Remember that God is near. Remember that. Jesus is God with us and when we cry out to him, we cry out to the one who suffered with us and yet he also contains that glory which we see on the mountain.

So, in the face of a disaster of a world, yes, we mark this moment of the transfiguration because it reveals God's gravitas. We recognize the miracle that is the incarnation of God in our flesh, and the exodus from sin and death in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We recognize that in Jesus, who is fully God and fully our brother, the veil between us and God is lifted, and we speak with freedom, proclaiming this freedom that God calls us to know that by grace, we are saved, empowered to act for the good of others, and share in God's ministry of reconciliation.

And so, with that, I'm going to leave you with a poem that is going viral, written by the late Ann Weems, who had served in our denomination as our Poet Laureate some 20 years ago. It is titled, "I No Longer Pray for Peace." Weems died in 2016. She was an elder in our denomination and an accomplished poet. These are her words:

On the edge of war, one foot already in,

I no longer pray for peace:

I pray for miracles.

*I pray that stone hearts will turn
to tenderheartedness,
and evil intentions will turn
to mercifulness,
and all the soldiers already deployed
will be snatched out of harm's way,
and the whole world will be
astounded onto its knees.*

*I pray that all the "God talk"
will take bones,
and stand up and shed
its cloak of faithlessness,
and walk again in its powerful truth.*

*I pray that the whole world might
sit down together and share
its bread and its wine.*

*Some say there is no hope,
but then I've always applauded the holy fools
who never seem to give up on
the scandalousness of our faith:
that we are loved by God.....
that we can truly love one another.*

I no longer pray for peace:

I pray for miracles. beloved, called and chosen for this very purpose. Amen.