

“His Face”  
Matthew 17: 1-9  
Sunday, March 6, 2011  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

King Duncan shares the story of Dr. William Stidger, who knew a lovely little 90-year-old lady named Mrs. Sampson.

“Mrs. Sampson was frail, feeble, even sickly. But Dr. Stidger said that when he was discouraged he always went to visit Mrs. Sampson. She had a radiant spirit that was contagious.

“One day he asked this 90-year-old woman, ‘What is the secret of your power? What keeps you happy, contented and cheerful through your sickness?’

“She answered with a line from a poem, ‘I had an hour of glory on a windswept hill.’

“Bill Stidger said, recounting this experience, ‘I knew she had been in touch with God and that was the whole reason [for her cheerfulness].’

“Listen again to her words: ‘an hour of glory on a windswept hill.’ It sounds very much like the experience Peter, James and John had on the Mount of Transfiguration.

“Sometimes we refer to special events in our life as ‘a mountaintop experience.’ Many of us have had such experiences, a time when God seemed very close. It may have been on an actual mountain. It may have been by a seaside. Dare I say it? It may even have happened in a worship service.”

The essence of a mountaintop experience is to see the face of Jesus in his full glory, as revealed by God.

## **I. God: Reveals Who Jesus Really Is**

You may remember that, at Jesus' baptism, God speaks, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Now, at Jesus' transfiguration, God speaks again: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

These two events – the baptism and the transfiguration of Jesus -- foreshadow his ultimate revelation as the Beloved, the Son of God, at his resurrection.

In the story of the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John witness the light of God shining from the face of Jesus and making his clothes appear "dazzling white." We are reminded of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai after receiving the tablets of the Law. His face shines so brightly with the glory of God that he must wear a cloth over his face. Otherwise the people will go blind from the radiance of God's glory, reflected in the face of Moses.

Interestingly enough, Moses appears on the mountain with Jesus during the Transfiguration, as does Elijah. While Moses represents the Law, Elijah represents the Prophets. Both are present at this moment when God reveals who Jesus is. Jesus is the beloved Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of Israel, the Savior of the world.

Kathleen Norris, as referenced by Mark Trotter, tells of her experience, in which she felt she had lost the exuberance of her childhood faith. Says Trotter:

"Kathleen Norris wrote a wonderful book called, Dakota. It is a book of meditation and devotion. People now take notice of her. In another writing she talked about her spiritual pilgrimage. She said she was raised in the Church. Then in young adulthood, like so many, she left the Church. Now, in middle age, she has come back to the Church through an experience that she had in a Benedictine monastery in Minnesota.

“There she experienced the spiritual discipline of the monastic order called lectio continuo, which means, sitting and listening to the reading of scripture. It changed her life, she said. It was an epiphany. It came to her when she was listening to the reading of the Revelation to John. At the beginning of the Book of Revelation, John addresses the churches. He says to Ephesus, ‘God has this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at first.’

“Norris wrote this. ‘These are words of conversion, taking hold they can change a life. ‘You have abandoned the love you had at first.’ When I first heard them in the monk’s choir, tears welled up in me, unexpected and unwelcome. I remembered how completely I had loved God and church as a child, and how easily I had drifted away as a young adult.’

“‘You have abandoned the love you had at first.’

“She continued. ‘Somehow the simple magic of having the Bible read aloud to me opened my eyes to recognize the extent I had allowed the resistance of the world to shake my faith. A secular world view, terribly sophisticated, but of little use to me in the long run, had taken hold of me. Consequently I had allowed the fire to die down in my heart. In the Benedictine choir I allowed John’s words to wash over me, and my full sense of the sacredness of the world returned, and I had begun to listen as a child again.’”

Hearing the Word of God read to her in a Benedictine monastery, Kathleen Norris was able to listen, as God urges us to listen. God longs for us to listen deeply to his Son, the beloved, revealed in glory, with face aglow in dazzling light, on the mountaintop.

## **II. The Disciples: Confused and Frightened**

The disciples are understandably confused and frightened by the miraculous vision on the mountaintop. They don’t know what to do. They are frozen with fear and awe and wonder. Peter offers to build three booths to honor Jesus, Moses and Elijah. This is reminiscent of the

Feast of Booths from Leviticus, chapter 23. During the Feast of Booths, the people of Israel would remember that they lived in booths, or tents, when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

Peter wants to set up camp on the mountain, remain there in the glorious presence of Jesus shining in the light of God and accompanied by Moses and Elijah. And why wouldn't Peter want to stay on that mountaintop? It was glorious!

Duncan shares this story from the summer of 1941:

“Sergeant James Allen Ward was awarded the Victoria Cross for climbing out onto the wing of his Wellington bomber at 13,000 feet above ground to extinguish a fire in the starboard engine. Secured only by a rope around his waist, he managed to smother the fire and return along the wing to the aircraft's cabin. Winston Churchill, an admirer as well as a performer of swashbuckling exploits, summoned the shy New Zealander to 10 Downing Street. Ward, struck dumb with awe in Churchill's presence, was unable to answer the prime minister's questions. Churchill surveyed the unhappy hero with some compassion.

“‘You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence,’ he said.

“‘Yes, Sir,’ managed Ward.

“‘Then you can imagine how humble and awkward I feel in yours,’ returned Churchill.

“Churchill knew he was in the presence of a real hero. So did the disciples. In fact, they knew they were in the presence of someone whose significance went beyond celebrity, even beyond heroic. He was their Lord, their Master, their King. If we are wise, he will be our Lord, our Master, our King. If we are wise, Christ will be our Hero, too.”

### **III. Jesus: Reassures Them**

Jesus reassures the disciples in their awe and confusion; “Do not be afraid,” he says. Jesus reassures us, too. “Do not be afraid,” he tells us. Jesus descends from the glory of the transfiguration, comes to the disciples, touches them and tells them not to be afraid.

Jesus descended from the glory of heaven, to live among us, to touch us, and to tell us not to be afraid.

Robert A. Beringer writes, in his book, Something's Coming...Something Great, of the hope we can offer to others, out of our experiences of valleys and mountaintops. He writes:

“When Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was doing research for her famous book on death and dying, she met a woman who was a member of the cleaning staff in a large hospital. This woman spent her days cleaning floors, emptying wastebaskets and tidying up patients' rooms. The hospital staff, however, began to notice that each time this woman finished cleaning the room of a dying patient, that person was invariably more content and more at peace.

“The woman explained to Dr. Kubler-Ross that she had known a lot of fear and tragedy in her life, as well as good times when others helped her know of God's love. She had been up and she had been down the mountain. The worst time was when her three-year-old son was ill with pneumonia. She brought him to the public health clinic, and he died in her arms while she waited her turn. All of this could have embittered her, but she said to Kubler-Ross, ‘You see, doctor, the dying patients are just like old acquaintances to me, and I'm not afraid to touch them, to talk to them, or to offer them hope.’

“The hospital decided to promote this woman to ‘Special Counselor To The Dying.’”

Jesus reassures us. He tells us, “Do not be afraid,” even though crazy, amazing wonders happen on the mountaintop. He is God’s beloved Son; he is also our brother, the one who lives among us and knows our valleys as well as he knows our mountaintops of joy and hope and wonderment.

**Closing.**

Thomas G. Long, in his book, Whispering the Lyrics, writes:

“In order to become a minister in most denominations, a ministerial candidate must be examined and tested theologically. The church has a right and an obligation to know if a person is theologically sound before authorizing ordination, so theological questions are asked. I heard recently about a veteran minister who always asks the same theological question of every potential minister; indeed, he has been asking this question of every candidate for over 30 years.

He begins by asking the candidate to look out the window. The puzzled examinee peers out the window, and the old minister adds, ‘Tell me when you see a person out there.’

“‘I see one,’ the candidate will haltingly announce.

“‘Do you know that person personally?’

“‘No, sir.’

“‘Good. Now, my question is this: Will you please describe that person theologically?’

“In three decades of experience in asking that question, the seasoned minister has found that the candidates tend to give one of two different answers. Some will say something like, ‘That person is a sinner in need of the redemption of Jesus Christ.’ Others, however, will respond, ‘Whether they know it or not, that person is a child of God, loved and upheld by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.’

“I suppose,’ this minister reflects, ‘that, technically, both of these answers are theologically correct. But it is my experience that those who give the second answer make the better ministers.’

“The reason, of course, is that they have the gift of ‘transfiguration discernment.’ They are able to see people in the present tense, in the middle of their circumstances, but they are able to see more than just the present tense. They can also see them as they were at the beginning of creation and as they will be in God's future -- a beloved child of God.”

Jesus is God’s beloved Son. Daily proximity to Jesus, basking in the light of His face, makes our faces shine, too. As we grow in our relationship with Jesus, we, too, can experience a transfiguration. Our attitudes can change! Our lives can change! Our faces can change! When others look at us, they might catch a glimpse of His face, shining through ours. When we look at others, we may begin to see them in more loving ways.

God’s Son, the Beloved, loves us. May we see Him. May we listen to Him.

It’s frightening. It’s confusing. Our lives will be changed forever.

Look at His face. Gaze on His face. Have eyes only for His face.

His face.

His glorious face, filled with the light of his love for you.

Amen.