



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

***In A New Light Transfiguration Sunday 2142021***

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Today's gospel describes what is perhaps the quintessential mountain top experience, one of many described in the Bible. There are moments when we come face to face with the glory of God and catch a glimpse of the indescribable fullness and radiance of God. There are moments when the Holy Spirit stops whispering, when he stops nudging us and it comes crashing in and grabs a hold of us in ways that are unmistakable.

Mountain top experiences can point us in new directions. They can show us new truths and open our eyes to the beauty and grace of God that we have been blind to. And yes, as we heard, they can leave us a little rattled, a little shaken, but they are also balm for the journey. They can renew our faith when it falters and restore our hope when it waivers. These God moments are one of those things that are just impossible to describe. Words never do them justice, but you know it when you see it. Perhaps that's why Jesus says, tell no one because encounters with God need to be experienced, not explained.

Have you had a mountain top experience? And if you haven't or you're not sure, don't worry. They will come. And they're not always big things. They don't have to be spectacular events. Most often I think they happen in the little moments of life and they always catch us by surprise, don't they? They're never something we can plan for and they can be agonizingly fleeting. And when we go looking for them, when we could really use one, they can be frustratingly elusive.

They're not something we can manufacture. They're not something we can reproduce on demand. And certainly not something that we can capture or bottle up, no matter how much we'd like to. Trust me, I've tried. No matter how fast I am with the camera, no matter how quick I spin up Facebook Live, no matter how wide the lens on my camera, it never quite captures it. And I end up making excuses like, you just needed to be there.

Just listen to today's description. It bleached the clothing whiter than any bleach. It almost sounds like a detergent commercial. Again, struggling to use words to describe something that is just beyond words. In fact, they're probably best described by the impact they have on us. They can leave us with a profound sense of peace and give us new perspectives and an assurance that we're on the

right track. They can be a visceral reminder that God is with us, and that God has this.

One of our teens, Aiden Nieper shared one of his moments during the Fruit of the Spirit series over the summer. He had just hit one of the big speed bumps of life, a difficult breakup. And it had really hurt him deeply. And his anger and his grief was starting to affect his schoolwork and his relationships with his friends and family. And then one summer night, he found himself standing on the shore of Lake Michigan, drawn to the unexpected beauty of the moment, the stillness of the night sky and the sound of the waves beckoned him, and he waded in clothes and all.

And as he did, he turned and looked back at the shore as if he was looking back on his life and he was overcome with a profound sense of gratitude. And as the currents of the lake jostled him back and forth, he was reminded of God's power and unfailing presence. His description was far more eloquent than my summary just now, but I think he would agree that either of our attempts to describe it pales in comparison to the sense of peace that swept over him that night.

Balm for the journey Celtic Christians referred to such places and such moments as thin places. They are times when the veil, which separates heaven and earth becomes so thin that for a time they seem to touch, perhaps even overlap as the awe and wonder of God's presence spills into our thirsty world. But mountain top experiences are by no means limited to nature and breathtaking vistas. They occur just as often in the valleys of our daily life.

Recall Saul unexpectedly encountering Jesus while traveling on a dusty road to Damascus, one that he had perhaps traveled many times, or the woman at the well encountering God in the midst of her daily chores under the hot sun, or the Roman Centurion unexpectedly converted while carrying out what was for him a routine execution. And for us Christians, whose mission is to heal and reconcile this broken world, they are perhaps most powerfully experienced in moments of connection with others, particularly in moments of transfiguration as we heard about in today's gospel.

And notice the word is "transfiguration," not "transformation." We might be inclined to use those words interchangeably, but transformation speaks to a true change in someone. Transfiguration is to be seen differently. The only change is on the outward form and the appearance. Jesus's transfiguration doesn't change who He is. It merely changed how the disciples see Him.

Transfiguration is seeing something or someone in a new light, one that reveals them to be something more than we had assumed or had previously encountered - to see more of their truth of who they are. Here the disciples see the humanity of Jesus, who they had known in the form of a dusty sun-worn face of an itinerant rabbi, perfectly suffused with the eternal glory of God. And in that

moment of transfigured clarity, they glimpsed the mystery of our faith. That God became human so that humanity might become like God.

One of my spiritual mentors put the same idea this way. He said, "Chris, as a Christian, my job is to see Christ in you so that I might find Him in me." It remains to this day, one of the most profound summaries of the faith I have ever heard - to see Christ in you so that I might find him in me. In other words, my salvation isn't going to be worked out on my own, no matter how high the mountain tops, no matter how breathtaking the views, my transformation needs to be worked out in and through others in moments of transfiguration.

And if that's a lot to try to wrap your arms around, let me just share a story that might help. Years ago, there was an elderly reclusive, homeless man, living in an upscale community in San Diego. He had been sitting on the same park bench for nearly 15 years. Every morning he could be found there, seven days a week, 365 days a year. On Christmas morning, on New Year's Eve, rain or shine.

He had become such a fixture that over time the neighbors began to experiment with random acts of kindness, small ones at first, just a simple wave or a good morning. And then one day he waved back and it grew from there. And over time, the neighbors kind of adopted him. One would bring him coffee in the morning, others would bring him lunch. A local sports star bought him a new coat every fall. And they didn't know his name so they nicknamed him The Mayor, so ensconced as he was in the public square.

And all manners of legends grew as to who he was; a former attorney, a college professor, a brilliant scientist, a war hero, though many agreed he was probably just some crazy guy. And then one morning the bench was empty. Calls to the local police department revealed that he had died of apparent lung failure. Saddened by the loss of their homeless friend, the neighbors began to leave flowers at the bench where he sat, and letters sprung up in the local papers, grieving his death.

And so one neighbor decided to do some research and find out more about him. And with the help of a local reporter, they discovered that The Mayor had a name, Jeff Pastorino. And he had parents and a twin brother living Back East. They hadn't seen him for more than 20 years. He had suffered a kind of mental breakdown and fallen so far off the grid that no one had any idea where he was.

The family flew out and the neighbors organized a makeshift memorial at the park around his bench where family members shared stories about his life and passed around pictures from his youth. And before their eyes, that weathered and grizzled sun-beaten face of a reclusive homeless man was replaced by handsome boyish young man, smiling with an unmistakable gleam in his eyes that hinted at the dreams in his heart about what he might do and who he might become one day.

In the midst of that makeshift memorial and the outpouring of love that brought it together, before their very eyes he came to be seen in a new light. Gone was the reclusive homeless man with no name and no story. And in his place was Jeff, a beloved son, a missed brother, and a precious child of God. In the wake of his transfiguration, a feeling of shame and guilt descended on many of the neighbors gathered. Could they have done more? Should they have tried harder to help, they wondered? But his brother instead said, thank you. Thank you for giving Jeff the companionship he struggled with. Thank you for giving him a sense of place that he so obviously needed. And he thanked him as well for that gathering. For coming together so that the whole world might see him in the same light that his family and God had seen him in all along.

The story made the front page of the news and it led to more letters and more social media posts. A book was even written, all described though, more than just the story of Jeff, they described the spiritual awakening and the sense of purpose and compassion that his transfiguration had brought into that community.

Again, words fail to do this justice. All I can tell you is the impact it had on me. When I saw his picture, when I read his life story, the transfiguration of Jeff Pastorino forever changed a part of me. I had been serving on the board of a homeless nonprofit, and there were moments when the statistics and the debates over shelter beds and budgets and city approvals were beginning to obscure the truth - that behind the numbers were people. That behind the statistics was someone's child, someone's grandmother, someone's brother, and it renewed my hope and re-inspired my passion for a world when we might see Christ in all people and in so doing find Christ in us. Balm for the journey.

As we head down the mountain with Jesus and enter the valley of Lent once more, perhaps we might take special care over these next few weeks to see one another in a new light, to see one another as the radiant and beloved child of God they already are. I can't tell you what that's going to look like for you. I can just tell you you'll know it when you see it.

Amen.

[End of Recording]