

Malcolm Clemens Young  
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X29  
The Feast of the Transfiguration 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 6 August 2017 (Sunday of 9 Pent 13A)

Exodus 34:29-35  
Psalm 99  
2 Peter 1:13-21  
Luke 9:28-36

### **Last Message for My Son**

*"You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter).*

On September 9, 2001 full of hope I stood in the pulpit for my first sermon at our new church. I was about to preach about falling in love. But in the silence after the prayer, and before I could say a word, our then two year old son sitting in the back pew called out in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "Daddy!" In that unscripted moment I said back, "I love you too Micah."

Since then I have been blessed to speak about Jesus to our children in sermons almost every Sunday of their lives. Over these years I have always remained grateful for this amazing gift. In a world where God is such a problem for so many people I get to speak about what I love most. This happens in a setting that is unhindered and undeterred by the norms or discomfort of secular society.

During that time I have preached some terrible sermons (I don't know why but some of my worst have been about films). I have preached many not-yet-finished sermons that I didn't really understand until a few days later. But there have also been those magical moments with gracious people sitting in the congregation like you are today. They looked interested and encouraged something to come out of me that can only be described as a gift from somewhere else.

So many times God has been with us in the sense of Ellen's preaching prayer when she says, "Between the words that are spoken and the words that are heard may the God's spirit be present."

Today is my last chance, my last sermon with him as a child under our roof. In a week he turns eighteen and leaves for college. I have to let him go into the company of other preachers, to learn from other teachers.

It is so hard to know what to say. How do you prepare someone for the ugliness and cruelty of the world? How do you alert your child to the extraordinary holiness that also arises out of our daily experience? What is the wisdom that he will need in the future?

I suppose that it begins with a picture of what it means to be human. Ray Hart wrote a book called *Unfinished Man and the Imagination*.<sup>1</sup> The implication of the title is that

through the power of imagination we are constantly being finished by our connections with each other and God.

We are creatures primarily directed by our unconscious life, by the mysterious strivings, longings and fears that we rarely can even name. The moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes that we are ninety percent chimp. By this he means that we are extraordinarily selfish primates, looking out for ourselves first but immersed in “relentless competition of groups with other groups.” Haidt says that we are also ten percent honeybee. In the sense that we, “long to be part of something larger and nobler than ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> I believe that there is more than this however.

This Thursday in the Cathedral lunchroom Mark Stanger talked about two competing Christian views of our situation. On the one hand there is the idea that the world is a minefield of evil, full of dangers. We have to avoid being trapped and damaged, ruined so badly that we lose ourselves. This picture focuses on the cruelty of the world and the unkindness that we recognize in our own hearts.

In a way we are in the impossible situation of being frenemies with God (that is, friend – enemies like Aaron Burr). Karl Barth (1886-1968) argues that creation does not come first as if it were separate from redemption. Our alienation from God is no further away from us than our creation. In every moment we depend for our existence on the same God that we reject through our thoughts and actions.

Barth writes, “To be sinners means that we have come to a place where our existence is absolutely inconceivable because at this place it can be only a plunge into nothing, where our existence can be understood only as an event of inconceivable kindness....”<sup>3</sup> Another way to express this would be to say that sin cuts off the branch that we are sitting on.

For many years I have been working on a chapter in a book called *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought*. It finally arrived in the mail last week. I wrote about changing views of nature. My story begins with the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In his later philosophy Kant explored the idea that we do not experience the world as it actually is (the noumena) but only as our senses and brain reconstruct it (the phenomena).<sup>4</sup>

Kant also cared deeply about the freedom of human actions. For him what we know about God is ultimately based on morality, on our experience of the social world.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century most Christians in most places concerned themselves almost entirely with the social world. I feel this especially when other kinds of Christians talk about what they believe. This picture of faith as relief from sin has an enormous power.

But as Mark Stanger says our tradition also offers another view of the human condition. In his words this picture of the world is “miraculous.” With a mysterious smile he quoted the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1884-1889). “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out like shook foil... For all this, nature is never spent / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things... / Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”<sup>6</sup>

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration, a feast dedicated to this second kind of faith. In my experience Anglicans care about sin and redemption but our hymns, art, culture, history and the spirit that animates us keep us from thinking that this is the only thing.

On Thursday night at evensong we sang Hymn 46. It conveys this sensibility. The second verse goes like this, “Now all the heavenly splendor breaks forth in starlight tender from myriad worlds unknown; and we, this marvel seeing, forget our selfish being for joy of beauty not our own.”<sup>7</sup> You might have known this, “joy of beauty not our own.”

I imagine the disciples did long after his death in recalling the joy of being with Jesus. Jesus goes to a mountaintop to pray with his friends Peter, James and John. As he prays his image (eidos) changes and his clothes flash with the whiteness of lightning. Then the great prophets Moses and Elijah speak to him. Strangely Jesus’ friends feel weighed down by sleep but manage to stay awake. When Jesus, Moses and Elijah are done talking Peter says that he wants to build dwellings for them. Suddenly clouds cover them, the disciples are terrified and a voice declares Jesus to be God’s son (Lk. 9).

I want to point out one striking thing about the story. Although this may have been one of the most important moments of their lives, the disciples almost missed it by being asleep.

This week after yoga Sadvi Bhagawati Saraswati and I were on a panel together being interviewed.<sup>8</sup> The first question was for her and it went like this. “Why are you a spiritual leader in India when it would have been so much easier for you to stay here and be an Episcopalian minister?”

Sadvi told the story of how she woke up. She grew up in the U.S. attended Stanford as an undergraduate and was a twenty-five year old psychology doctoral student when on a lark she decided to go to India. There she had an experience of God that changed her life. She did not choose this. She felt compelled. She said it was as if she had been walking along a beach picking up seashells when all of a sudden she came upon someone offering her diamonds instead. It was obvious to her that she should throw away all the seashells so that she could carry the jewels.

Every day you too are being offered diamonds. But too often we just sleep through it. Instead of waking up to transfiguration we are obsessed with how our bodies look, our accomplishments, how others perceive us. We are haunted by regrets about the past. We refuse to live in the present because of our dreams of the future.

This week I listened to a Dear Sugars Podcast about the struggles of teenagers. One twenty-year-old girl had been captain of her high school cross-country team, valedictorian, totally in control of her grades and weight. Everyone always commented about how beautiful she was. By the time she reached college she realized that she had an eating disorder. What struck me most about the broadcast was how much she and the hosts, and all of us, care so much about what people thought of us in high school.

What will it take for us to wake up out of this dreamlike existence, for us to stop trying to always win other people's approval through our accomplishments and our appearance (from trying to win over even God)? How can we wake up to see the moments of transfiguration happening all around us?<sup>9</sup> The Apostle Paul writes to his friends, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you" (Eph. 5).

Something like this happened to me this weekend. My son and I went surfing at Bolinas for one last time before he leaves for college. On a perfectly still, impossibly temperate summer day we passed along the edge of the mirror-like lagoon and I felt an intense surge of emotion. Later we traded perfect glassy waves, just the two of us, resting only to watch the pelicans glide past. Above the rim of hills the sky, with distant high clouds and closer mists, seemed infinitely beautiful and mysterious.

In that moment it seemed like God said, "as far as you can see from Pedro Point in San Mateo County to Duxbury Reef, this is the world given for you."

The last sermon is done and I can hardly believe that this season of our life is over. What I want for my son is the same thing I want for all of us. In terms of the first picture of faith, I pray that we are forces of compassion, justice and goodness, that through kindness our lives will build God's kingdom. But I also pray for the second religious vision. I pray that we will recognize that the "world is charged with the grandeur of God." I pray we will seek and discover "the joy of beauty not our own.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* (NY: Herder & Herder, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (NY: Pantheon, 2012) 220.

<sup>3</sup> "To be sinners, as we are shown to be in the revelation of Jesus Christ, means that we have separated ourselves from the One without whom we would not be even in this separation and yet, separated from whom, we cannot be in any true or proper sense. To be sinners means that we have come to a place where our existence is absolutely inconceivable because at this place it can be only a plunge into nothing, where our existence can be understood only as an event of inconceivable kindness, or it cannot be understood at all." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part One* Tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) 444.

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1965).

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (Oxford University Press, 1948) 70.

<sup>7</sup> Hymn 46 from The 1980 Hymnal. Words Paul Gerhard, translated by Robert Seymour Bridges and others, Music, "O Welt, ich muss dich lassen, melody attributed to Heinrich Isaac (1450?-1517); harmony Johann Sebastian Bach.

<sup>8</sup> Tuesday 1 August 2017.

<sup>9</sup> The second element in the story that seems odd to me is Peter's offer to make three dwellings (called skēnas in Greek). This is the same word that John uses in his prologue when he talks about the Word dwelling among us. Matthew writes that Peter did not know what he was saying. And yet I have a sense for why he did. I think that this refers to our longing to hold on to these moments of transfiguration. We want to stay on the mountain, to remain in that moment of unity with God forever. We can be so overcome by the beauty of holiness that we do not trust that God will give us this experience again.