

Sermon for The Feast of the Transfiguration – August 6, 2023
Preached at Saint Aiden’s Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon
Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99:5-9; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

Early Christians inherited a real fear of idolatry from Judaism. They were concerned lest any pictures of a holy person or a Biblical scene become an occasion for drawing our attention *away* from God. But from the fifth century on, images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Saints began to be used in both public and private worship.

“Icon” is simply the Greek word for “Image.” And it was particularly in the Eastern portion of the Christian Empire where icons come into common use in worship. But a great controversy arose over the veneration of these pictorial images, which we now call icons. It seems that the use of these images (or “icons”) did often border on idolatry: the image itself being mistaken for the reality it represented.

This uncertainty over the place of images in worship, later called “The Iconoclastic Controversy,” lasted for over half a century! The Iconoclasts (the image-destroyers) battled the Iconophiles (those who defended the veneration of these images). And if you think we have disputes in the Church today take note! This was a lot more than an eighth century theological debate: it involved the destruction of some of the art in the churches, subsequent riots in the street, and a systematic persecution of the monks (who were vigorous defenders of the icons).

It was the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Church, held in 787, that finally brought this struggle to an end. This meeting condemned iconoclasm (the destruction of the images), and drew a clear distinction between *worship* (reserved for God alone) and *veneration* (the honor given to an icon, but in reality directed to the holy subject it represented). As a result, icons were once more restored to the churches and allowed to be used in private devotions.

Now there are three things I want to point out to you about icons:

First, the icon concentrates on the essential, to the exclusion of the extraneous. The sanctity of the holy figures is important, while the human characteristics are not emphasized. The bodies of the holy figures often seem thin and two-dimensional, almost, weightless, and the bland contenances are there to emphasize their “spiritual” nature.

Second, icons are made according to age-old rules. Their forms and colors depend not merely upon the imagination and taste of the artist, the iconographer, but are handed down by tradition. Each one of the saints had to be recognizable by distinctive features (a beard, a cloak, or style of hair, for example), and other features were associated with certain scenes (so the nativity is invariably shown as taking place in a cave).

Third, perspective is largely ignored, scenes being non-dimensional, rather than two dimensional; and the more important figures simply being larger than the auxiliary figures. To accentuate this, the scene was usually purged of any deep or naturalistic landscape, a neutral gold background taking its place. The total effect was calculated to concentrate the attention and to invite the viewer *into* what was represented. Note that the viewer is always considered to be part of the icon.

You see, icons are not meant to be either flat *or* spacial: rather, they are meant to be *transparent*, something like stained-glass windows in western art. This transparency is almost literally true, for the icon is first of all completely covered with the highly reflective gold paint that functions as the highlights and the halos, as well as the background. The finest icons possess what can only be described as an all-pervading celestial radiance. Just like our Eucharistic liturgy, icons try to give us a glimpse of heaven.

The idea that icons are like windows into the spiritual realm is affirmed by John Walsted, an Episcopal priest, as well as a maker or “writer” of icons. He draws an analogy between icons and the consecrated host of the Eucharist. Rather than seeing it as something small and round and white, Father Walsted suggests that we think of the host from our Lord’s point of view: Jesus has incorporated us into God’s kingdom, and the small bit of bread is the point of contact. He writes, “All it is, is the visual contact point between heaven and earth, between the immense life of Christ and our own lives in the world.”

Now the reason I have taken all this time to present something of the background, style and meaning of icons to you, is not because I am a great advocate of iconography, although I very much appreciate and treasure this form of Christian art. The reason I have spoken of icons is because the gospel today is the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord, and I don't think many of us know what to do with it. It is a difficult story to approach.

Because it has been helpful to me in my own prayers and meditation, I would suggest that we look upon the Transfiguration event as an icon, an image upon which to gaze, a scene which we can enter, a window into the spiritual realm, a contact point between the immense life of Christ and our own lives in the world. But icons do not reveal themselves to us at first sight; we only really see them after long, prayerful attention. Similarly, when we patiently entrust ourselves to the image of the Transfiguration, we will find that we are drawn into closer communion with the God of love.

Now I want to ask you to do something difficult. If I could, I would have given you a picture of one of the famous icons of the Transfiguration. But be creative and close your eyes and *imagine* you are looking at an icon of the Transfiguration and immerse yourself in the image as you listen to the gospel story once again. You may find it helpful in your meditation to identify yourself with one of the figures on the icon: Peter, James or John; Moses or Elijah; or even with the transfigured Christ! Let the icon speak to you of the unique way in which God has chosen to love you.

Imagine the disciples walking up the mountain to pray with Jesus. And then, although heavy with sleep, they see that the appearance of Jesus' face altered completely and his clothes become dazzling white, brilliant as the sun. Suddenly there are two others speaking with Jesus: Moses and Elijah—also revealed in heavenly splendor.

It is a fearful scene! God's presence seems to be at hand. And yet, those three who appear above the terrified disciples are speaking about the path Jesus must take, about how he would fulfill God's purpose by dying in Jerusalem. Then, just as Moses and Elijah seem to be leaving, Peter, perhaps trying to preserve the moment of glory, says to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (Of course, as the Gospel writer tells us, he didn't really know what he was saying.)

But even as Peter was still speaking, God's presence overshadowed them like a cloud, and the three disciples were afraid as it enveloped them. A voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" And when the voice stopped, as suddenly as it had begun, there was Jesus—all alone. The disciples were so stunned that they were reduced to silence and, at least for that time, they didn't tell anyone what they had seen.

In the Transfiguration you can focus on what is essential: the person of Christ. In the Transfiguration you can see the heavenly image of Christ revealing to us the glory of God. In the Transfiguration you can leave this temporal, earthly realm, and participate, even if just for a moment, in the immensely rich life of Christ.

If you do that, the transfiguration event will take on meaning beyond the rather spectacular details of the story. Then the Transfiguration will become for you *an icon*, a window through which to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ *and also* a way to see God's glory in your very own life.