

Sermon for the Transfiguration of Our Lord, 26.ii.2006, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bregue, Pennsylvania
Holy Eucharist, LBW Setting 2
2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

“And He was transfigured before them.”

– Mark 9:2c

Today, on this Second Epiphany, on this feast of the great manifestation of Our Lord Jesus Christ to His Disciples, to you also and to me, I am so glad to be back with you to witness what they witnessed through God’s Word, and to see what they would only see later, the incomparable beauty and glory of God as Our Lord comes to be with us in the humble elements of His Holy Supper. Like the beauty of this high Altar, which has stood as a sign of God’s presence among us for six decades, now transformed by the artist’s eye and skilled hands to be a new way of bringing us together through Christ’s sacrifice for us,

while remaining what it always has been, may His presence to us and in us through His Body and Blood transform us into that same presence in the lives we lead consecrated to His *goodness*, to His *truth* and to His *glory*, which is everlasting.

The Greek philosopher, Plato, was perhaps the first to state that anything and everything worth knowing can be classified according to three categories. Perhaps you know them. They are *The Good*, *The True* and *The Beautiful*. This is not true because Plato said it and his students wrote it down. It is true because reality is just so. Engineers and physicists, mathematicians and chemists, biologists and geologists, historians and sociologists and those who study ourselves and the world we live in in a thousand different ways all find themselves addressing either the question of *The Good*, *The True* or *The Beautiful*.

Is a person, a family, an institution a nation or a civilization morally *good*, making an enduring contribution to

the human story, or are there signs of corruption which will destroy future generations? Does a machine, a star system or a living body function in a *good* way, or is there dysfunction, a missing or diseased part or organ that will cause the whole living or manufactured system to tear itself apart? Are the words of men and nations, words spoken in conversation and letters, words enshrined in official documents and archives, *true* to the deeds that actually mark lives and make history, no matter what is said and written about it? Is our thinking, our speaking and our writing *true* to what is, and not simply an echo of what we have heard said by others or what we wish to be so? And, finally, do *The Good* and *The True* come together in such elegant and harmonic balance, in the representation of reality or a view of reality through painting or sculpture, in the representation of feeling and the world of the soul through music, in the order and balance but also the incredibly elaborate display of nature, in the integrity, the self-discipline and the

selfless love of a life lived as a work of art, so that we can behold

The Beautiful?

If the eye of the biologist, of the engineer, of the student of humankind is keen enough to recognize *The Beautiful* when it is nascent, waiting to develop and be revealed under the right conditions, and when it finally unfolds, what about the theologian? Most of us, especially most of us Lutheran theologians, like to stick to the *truth* of dogmatic and systematic theology, making sure that what we say and write about God and our relationship with God does not contradict itself, the Bible or the Church's historic and Biblical teaching. Other theologians prefer to focus on *The Good*, using ethical decision-making as the point of departure and the goal in what we say about God and the God we meet in Jesus Christ. Few, *very* few theologians have ever taken up the challenge to reflect on that third category of what is, on the *beauty* of God. The 13th Century Doctor of the Church, Saint Thomas Aquinas, was just

getting to that aspect of God in his great *Summa Theologica*, an attempted *summary* of all that could and should be said about God. But early one morning, right after celebrating the Sacrament of the Altar, Master Thomas said to his assistant at the University of Paris, “You can take all the books we have checked out back to the library and empty out my study for someone else to use, for after what I have just *seen*, everything I have written is like so much worthless straw.” The Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, was a theologian of our time who attempted not only to behold the beauty of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in prayer, but to write about this for others to read and to ponder. His greatest work had a one-word title, the word the New Testament uses to describe the beauty and majesty of the Living and Triune God, what the Disciples beheld on the Mount of Transfiguration. That word is *δόξα*, ‘*glory*.’ I am happy to learn that the new Pope is a student of Father von Balthasar, that he is a theologian who

looks at God and all that God has done, does and will do with an artist's eye, open to what the greatest of all Artists may do next in revealing the Father's glory in the Son through their All-Holy Spirit, One God.

What does the artist do? The artist looks for and *sees* the *possibilities* in what you or I might consider just a blank canvass or piece of sketching paper, in a pleasant enough but otherwise unremarkable landscape, sunrise, sunset, cloud formation or cluster of fruit on a table, in an ugly urban landscape or in a piece of cast-off junk, in a bird song or the sound of wind, in something that is already present in what we also experience, but something which is able to unfold before our senses only through the imagination of the artist, the dancer, the musician, the composer, the playwright, the novelist or the poet who calls that unnoticed *beauty* forth so that its *glory*, its *shine* is revealed to us. Like the casual visitor to museums or art galleries or the occasional concertgoer, the exalted experience of a powerful

work of art or piece of music may fade quickly, especially if we lack the language to be able to describe, if only to ourselves, what it is that moved us in the beauty we have experienced. But what we can easily remember is how we were *surprised* by joy, by deep sorrow or by both at the same time, how, on an otherwise normal an unremarkable day, a sight or sound called us out of ourselves and above our everyday world.

[Never mind our inability to describe how or where or when it was that the composer or the artist, the orchestra or the dancers moved us to joy or tears, though I know this is frustrating, especially for those who do know their musicology or art history. I am proud to say that one of my former theology students is developing into quite a scholar of sacred music and its composition, but I regularly drive him batty when I try to describe this or that phrase in a piece of music I have heard that really speaks to me. “You know,” I’ll tell him, “it’s that part where you can’t breathe anymore.” I wasn’t able to be

any more precise than that when a friend of ours took us to a performance of Tchaikovsky's ballet, *Swan Lake*. I expected it to be beautiful, as I had heard most of the music many times. And I was grateful that it was choreographed in a traditional way, without 'updating' the story to include drug pushers and other street hoodlums. What I was not prepared for was the way the tragic story, the beautiful dancing and the music all worked together. "So, how did you like it?" our friend asked me. "You might have told me to bring three extra handkerchiefs," was all I can remember saying in reply. I have no idea how Tchaikovsky did what he did to create that thing of beauty, but I knew what my heart was telling me.]

The artist sees *possibilities* and calls these into being, but through what? Through *love*, through *sheer love*. Only love can call something into being from nothing, can call beauty and harmony into being from barrenness, ugliness or deformity. God the Father, the Creator and Artist of the whole cosmos, has

seen *possibilities* in *us*. From the beginning of our sorry history there has been little else to see *but* possibilities as nations and civilizations have been built up only to be torn down by barbarians and to crumble from within from their own moral corruption. What *but possibilities* have there been to see in us as we build up science, technology and learning of all sorts for a thousand, two thousand or three thousand years, only to let all our achievements collapse under the weight of our invincible blindness and ignorance? And have we expended even a fraction of the intellect and energy on making life less of a burden for our fellow man that we have spent on devising new forms of cruelty, inhumanity and mass murder? Those of us who have survived the last century know the answer to that question. Those of us destined to live through most century will find out the same answer over and over again, I am sadly sure. And still, and *still* God looks upon us and sees what only the artist can see, and by God's own mind and hand, through that

Word through Whom all things were made, the Father brings forth a startling, surprise—our humanity as we were created, our humanity in its wholeness, God’s own love in our flesh and blood.

Neither the Disciples nor the Evangelists had much of an idea of how to describe the unfolding, the manifestation of the beauty and glory of God in Jesus, *the gleaming beauty of their own humanity in Jesus’s transfigured form standing there between Moses and Elijah, there right at the center of God’s Word to the world, right between the Law and the Prophets*, though Luke tries to do better than Mark or Matthew, adding that not only Jesus’ clothes but also His *face* became radiant. Was He not the same Jesus? Yes. But they had never seen Him in that *light* before. Would they be able to describe what they had seen? Jesus told them not even to try for the time being, telling them that they would not understand it until the finishing touch had been put on the beautiful thing God was doing in

Him. They would have to wait and see, to wait and to see through the eyes of the greatest of all Artists what would be allowed to unfold from what had already been there before their eyes all the time, since the foundation of the world. Would they forget what they had seen? The memory would fade a little, but it would return with full force each time they heard the words, “This is my Body, given for you . . . this is the Cup of my Blood, shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins,” just as we remember when He stands and speaks among us, just as we behold His glory too. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has feed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

