

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY  
FEBRUARY 22, 2009  
“TRANSLUCENCE”

Let us pray: In the words of one of my least-favorite hymns in ELW that nonetheless by its last verse gets it right:

*As we gaze on your kingly brightness,  
So our faces display your likeness,  
Ever changing from glory to glory,  
Mirrored here,  
May our lives tell your story.*

*Shine on me, shine on me.*

And then that refrain from which the hymn takes its title that I find truly hokey: “*Shine, Jesus shine.*” It is in the name of Jesus, God’s translucent One, that I pray. Amen.

OK, I’m over it! Though even our Hymn of the Day shares similarly bad poetic sense in inviting us to join in singing “*Christ upon the mountain shows, where brighter than the sun he glows!*” As if this story of the transfiguration is essentially about Jesus’

wattage, his own power to light up like a Christmas tree much to Peter's delight who in good religious entrepreneurial fashion enthused over the idea of establishing a franchise on the spot replete with three booths—for what, to charge admission to the light show?

Instead, as I always argue, we need to see this day of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop as the hinge in our church year between Christmas and Easter, the day in which the season of Epiphany that gives us time to bask in the afterglow of Christmas, to absorb the great good news of what it means for God to have become one of us in this baby Jesus now grown to manhood means in all its revelatory, epiphanic power, is now brought to its climax where Jesus is transfigured appearing before his inner circle of disciples in conversation with Moses and Elijah—the two great figures of Israel's past representing the Law and the Prophets. While we're not told in so many

words what it is they're talking about, my hunch is that they're offering counsel to Jesus as God's sage Word-bearing counselors of old, helping Jesus to prepare for what lies before him in Jerusalem, symbolized by the season of Lent upon which we the church now prepare to enter—the journey to Jerusalem and the passion that Jesus will endure and the cross he will bear to Golgotha. Transfiguration Sunday is the pivot point between Epiphany and Lent—a memorable, transfiguring moment in which most significantly of all Jesus will once again hear his Abba's voice—as at his baptism—sounding from above again declaring “*This is my Son, the beloved*” but now adding the simple divine directive intended not for Jesus but for his disciples—for you and me—“***LISTEN TO HIM!***”

All the hoopla of his being “transfigured”—a word in Greek that literally is “metamorphosized”—the word,

metamorphosis, that we use of the process of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly—the same word that Paul uses in his Letter to the Romans when he says: “*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds....*meaning “be utterly changed”—accompanied by the “*dazzling white*” imagery that suggests light so bright that it hurts the eye—like looking into the sun itself. All this leads me to think of this in terms of a word we don’t hear much any more but that we here in our sanctuary experience week in and week out as we worship surrounded by our beautiful stained glass windows: **translucence**.

You may remember the old distinction you probably learned as kids in general science class regarding the ways in which we experience light as it encounters different kinds of materials. First there is **transparency** in which light simply passes directly through a window in which we say we see “out”—transparent means, according

to my dictionary, “transmitting light rays so that objects on the other side may be distinctly seen.” Hence “obvious”, “open”, “frank”, “candid” are other secondary meanings of transparency. You may have noticed how the words become a piece of our political jargon in recent days, as relating to the “transparency” or lack thereof of our financial institutions, e.g.

Opposite of “transparent” is the word “opaque” — a word that means “not letting light pass through,” “not reflecting light,” “not shining or lustrous,” hence “dull or dark,” “hard to understand,” “obscure” — as in a difficult sermon, perhaps!

But distinguished from these two extremes is a third word, “translucent,” which comes from a Latin word meaning literally “to shine through,” not in the sense of transparency but rather, my dictionary says, “letting light pass but diffusing it so that objects on the other side cannot be distinguished” — like our stained glass

windows, for example, or our “frosted” windows in the narthex. I don’t want to get overly subtle here, but I do want to suggest that “translucence” may be a good metaphor for us to use in thinking about Jesus on this Transfiguration Sunday that moves beyond the superficial “shine, Jesus shine” language of our hymnody that hurts our eyes and offends our aesthetic sense. “Translucence” more imaginatively suggests that in Jesus we truly encounter the light of God but in an indirect way that diffuses the divine glory by passing through the medium of a human body, becoming thereby light which we humans can endure, and not only endure but live by, grow toward, and aesthetically revel in—enabling and energizing our worship and our work.

Some of you, I’m sure, have had occasion to visit a great cathedral, perhaps a great Gothic or Romanesque or Baroque cathedral in Europe or even one of our American neo-Gothic replicas. I remember

visiting the Fraumunser, Our Lady's Church, in Zurich, Switzerland—a formerly RC now Swiss Reformed Church stripped bare of all art, in the severe style of early Calvinism—save for the beautiful Chagall stained glass windows that save that sacred place from becoming merely a religious barn, that serve God's translucent purpose of transfiguring this space into a window onto God—not a direct glimpse into God's utter holiness, which no human could survive. But a view of God “diffused” through the life and ministry, the passion, death and resurrection of God's son, our human brother, Jesus.

I've come to think of my old friend Bill Willms' death as a kind of transfiguring experience of translucence as well. A week ago last Wednesday Ruth and I had decided that we'd better take the chance to visit Bill while we could, somehow fearing, I guess, mainly by intuition the worst. You who've seen Bill these last few months as he's

occasionally attended worship here with us have witnessed the shocking way in which he was more and more coming to resemble a living skeleton. Well, when Ruth and I arrived that Wednesday morning at his room in Los Alamitos Hospital it was the yet more shockingly grim skeletal figure of Bill sitting up in bed, eyes closed and breathing very shallowly that greeted us—along with his wife Frances, his son and daughter, and Pastor Jim Bessey standing sentinel at his bedside. While they were awaiting the arrival of a person from home hospice, his surgeon arrived and it was clear from his demeanor as well as his words that it was doubtful that Bill would be with us long enough to be needing hospice care.

After chatting with Frances and the others a bit, I asked if I could read a psalm with Bill, and Ruth and I crowded in on either side of Bill at the head of the bed so that—unresponsive as he seemed to be—he might still be able to hear me through the

fog of his dying. I opened to the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm and read slowly and deliberately words including these:

*Lord you have searched me out and known me;  
you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
you discern my thought from afar....  
Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I climb up to heaven you are there;  
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.*

Ruth, standing closest to Bill while I read, holding his hand, said afterwards that she heard Bill in the faintest repeated groan accompanying his shallow breathing, in effect whisper his assent to these words that I always find among the most consoling in all of Scripture—the assurance that God “comprehends” us in the literal sense of holding our whole being—from our origin to our destination—in God’s own care and

keeping. I went on with the words of the psalmist:

*If I say, “Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night, darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike. And then these words of the most intimate assurance possible:*

*For you yourself created my inmost parts, you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will thank you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well. My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book; They were fashioned day by day, when as yet thee was none of them. How deep I find your thoughts, O God! How great is the sum of them...to count them all, my life span would need to be like yours.”*

These were the assurances by which Bill lived and died—and just a couple of hours later, after Ruth and I had left, and Frances and Pastor Jim had concluded their conversation with the hospice person, Jim sensed it was time to pray with Frances and Bill the church’s beautiful prayer of Commendation for the Dying—the Lutheran version of last rites—prayed only at a time of imminent death. And as Jim tells the story, Bill simply sighed again, having participated in the prayer with his Pastor and wife, and breathed his last, releasing his spirit to God, his maker, redeemer, and comforter.

Bill, who always sought to be liturgically correct, played his part to the end. And that hospital bed and Bill’s manner of dying, now become for me in memory truly **luminescent** of God’s grace, refracted and diffused through the dying body of God’s St. Bill. The words of the Psalmist I’d read occurred to me again after his funeral on Thursday when I sat and talked with his 90 year old mother from Texas, in whose “womb Bill was knit together”—and we wondered

together whether we might have met 30 some years ago at Bill's and Frances' wedding in San Francisco which Ruth and I attended.

And then finally there was the transfiguring conversation some of us had with former Bishop Paul Eggertson whom Bill had first served as Asst. to the Bishop and who served as preacher at the funeral. Paul, a good preacher, had preached an unusually "straight" Lutheran proclamation of the Gospel as found in Romans chapter 8, mentioning Bill a few times but unusual for today's funerals, including very few stories or reminiscences of Bill. Afterward he explained to a few of us how once he and Bill had been at the funeral of a pastor together and were driving back to synod headquarters, both of them quiet and musing to themselves about the service they had just attended which had included a good many so-called eulogies, you know, people getting up and telling stories about the deceased—often at considerable length. As Bishop Eggertson said, "you know how Bill if he couldn't say something nice about someone or something would usually

keep silent.” But finally he smiled ruefully at the Bishop and said, “You know I thought funerals were supposed to be about God—and not the person who died.” I told Paul he ought to have told that story. He said, he thought he’d just “do it”—do the kind of sermon—that Bill clearly wanted for his funeral—one proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in the face of death—of which Bill’s death now had become the occasion.

And so—I’m glad to say—Bill’s funeral, like his dying itself, was luminescent to the grace and glory of the God he trusted in and served so faithfully. Maybe “translucence” won’t work for all of us as a metaphor for God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ. But take a moment whenever you first come into this sanctuary to just sit in silence amid our beautiful stained glass windows and let God’s translucent presence have its way with you.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.