

SHINE CHRIST'S LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Matthew 17:1-9

February 15, 2026

Our New Testament lesson is from the Gospel of Matthew. Our scripture today opens to a dramatic scene.

Jesus has just revealed to his disciples that he must now go to Jerusalem. There he will undergo suffering and even death at the hands of the elders and chief priests. On the third day, he will be raised from the dead. Jesus has called them to discipleship—challenging them that if they are to be his followers, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

They are confused and do not understand. And so we begin with Jesus leading Peter, James, and John up a mountain. Here they will witness Jesus being transfigured as God speaks—this is the second time in the gospels that God talks to earth—first at Jesus' baptism, and now Jesus is claimed as God's own dear son. God commands them to "listen to him".

But it wasn't just the words that Peter, James, and John heard; it was also what they saw: the appearance of Jesus, his face changed, his clothes, dazzling white, his appearance bathed in God's glory, with Moses and Elijah.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday immediately preceding Ash Wednesday, the last Sunday before Lent, when we remember and celebrate Jesus' transfiguration.

The transfiguration marks a turning point in Jesus' earthly ministry. Immediately afterwards, Jesus "sets his face towards Jerusalem" (that's Luke's way of putting it), where he knows what awaits him: "The Son of Man," Jesus says to his disciples, "must suffer and be killed and after three days rise again." But (we're told) "the disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

But even if they did not understand it at the time, you have to believe that what they heard and saw on the mountaintop stayed with Peter, James, and John.

Through their long trek to Jerusalem, through that awful week after they arrived, through all the confusion and fear, all the trials and tribulations, all the terror and all the betrayals, you have to believe that Peter, James, and John remembered his transfiguration—remembered his glory, and especially remembered those words from heaven above: *Listen to him.*

So listen now for God's Word to us: The transfiguration of Jesus, Matthew, chapter seventeen, beginning with verse 1:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

God has shown us how to shine the light of Jesus into the darkness—into the world.

In this transfiguration story, Jesus tells us how to be a church—to confess that he is indeed divine and the crucified Christ, and he invites us to follow him into the world, doing as he commands. (Bruner, Matthew Commentary)

The glory of God shining through Jesus Christ.

The glory of God shining through us as we follow Jesus and obey his commands.

The light of Christ shining in the darkness.

We see Christ's light all around us—in the world, in this church, in our places of work, our homes, in one another—if we only have the eyes to see. Transfiguration.

Open your eyes. Look for it.

I see it in Elroy, a man whose kindness and quiet yet powerful presence reflect the glory of God. Elroy lights the way for a young man, Tim O'Brien. Like Jesus helping the disciples find their footing when they were afraid on the mountaintop, Elroy helps O'Brien find his footing when he is lost and afraid.

O'Brien details in his book, *The Things They Carried*, his time at the Tip Top Lodge, the summer before he left for Vietnam. O'Brien landed there following a breakdown caused by his relentless inner conflict around the draft—to serve or to dodge it and escape across the border into Canada.

Following his senior year of college, while working at a pork slaughterhouse as he waited for graduate school to begin in the fall, the tension within him became unbearable, O'Brien snapped and walked away from the slaughterhouse line abandoning a pig carcass swinging from the rack.

He packed his bags, wrote his parents a note stating he would be in touch, got in his car and drove. Exhausted, he finally stopped at the Tip Top Lodge.

Elroy Berdahl, owner of the rundown Tip Top Lodge took one look at O'Brien and recognized the simple fact that the young man was in crisis. Elroy showed him to a cabin. Beginning with dinner he began to share his daily meals and tasks with O'Brien. The simplicity and the safety of routine allowed O'Brien to sort through what

he must do: Face the draft and go to Vietnam or dodge it and cross the border into Canada.

As O'Brien fought the demon of shame, Elroy and O'Brien ended up on the Rainy River one afternoon to fish. O'Brien writes:

"I remember the wind in my ears, the sound of the old outboard Evinrude (boat). For a time I didn't pay attention to anything, just feeling the cold spray against my face, but then it occurred to me that at some point we must've passed into Canadian waters, across the dotted line between two different worlds, and I remember a sudden tightness in my chest as I looked up and watched the far shore come at me.

Elroy cut the engine, allowing the boat to fishtail lightly about twenty yards offshore. The old man didn't look at me or speak. Bending down, he opened his tackle box and busied himself with a bobber and a piece of wire leader, humming to himself, his eyes down. I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for myself.

I remember staring at the old man, then at my hands, then at Canada. It was twenty yards and I could've done it. I could have jumped and started swimming for my life. I couldn't decide.

I couldn't act, I couldn't comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity. All I could do was cry.

At the rear end of the boat Elroy pretended not to notice. He held a fishing rod in his hand, his head bowed to hide his eyes... A great worldwide sadness came pressing in on me. And what was so sad, I realized, was that Canada had become a pitiful fantasy. It was no longer a possibility. I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. It was embarrassment, and that's all it was. And right then I submitted, I would go to war. I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to.

I sat in the bow of the boat and Elroy remained quiet. He kept fishing. He was simply there like the river and the late-summer sun. And yet by his presence, his mute watchfulness, he made it real.

Elroy Berdahl saw me through the darkness of it all and I returned home and I went to war."

Transfiguration—God's love and light shone in Elroy—guiding O'Brien. Yes, there was still darkness in front of him. O'Brien could not stay at the Tip Top Lodge, he had to go home and face the war in Vietnam.

Just as the disciples Peter, James, and John could not stay on the mountaintop. They had to go to Jerusalem and face what was next.

We all have *transfiguration moments* in our lives. If we only open our eyes and look.

Several Sundays ago, I was standing at the back of the Sanctuary when Gabe and Jude Srour came rushing in. As their eyes adjusted from the bright light of the morning, they came in and headed quickly over to me. Gabe (10) and Jude (6) have all the enthusiasm of young boys. With great excitement they each handed me an envelope. *For the Food Pantry*, each envelope read.

"Pastor Karen, would you give this to the Food Pantry to buy more food?" I was taken back as their voices were shaking with excitement, and their faces flushed with joy.

"Absolutely! Thank you. This is wonderful, Gabe and Jude. The Pantry will be able to feed more people with your gifts. I couldn't help but ask. "How did you earn your money?"

Their eyes were bright. "We have been saving part of our allowance each week."

As quickly as they had rushed in, they were off to join their dad, George, in the pews as worship was beginning.

Transfiguration. The glory of God was shining on Gabe's and Jude's faces. Through their generosity, the light of Christ and the glory of God would be shining in the darkness of hunger at Northside Food Pantry. The light of love brought by two brothers, Gabe and Jude. Ten and six years old.

My morning was changed. *Transfiguration.*

God's glory is reflected in the ordinary moments of life as well as the moments of crisis, sorrow, and joy in our lives. The light of God shines through them.

This morning we will be ordaining and installing our new class of Deacons. I am excited and humbled by these women, men, and youth. In orientation I learned of both their excitement and trepidation about beginning this new role in the church. I was inspired by their hunger for scripture and their certainty about the necessity of Jesus Christ being at the center of all they will do as Deacons.

In moments where they sit with someone who is sick or grieving—someone in crisis—they will need the tender presence that Elroy offered while young O'Brien considered swimming ashore into Canada.

They will experience the joy of giving when they deliver the chancel flowers on Sunday morning just as Gabe and Jude did as they handed me their allowance for the Food Pantry on that Sunday morning.

They will celebrate the sacrament of Home Communion with individuals and families in ordinary moments as well as moments of grief and sorrow.

They will bring the light of Christ and the glory of God to families from Northside Food Pantry through *Christmas for our Northside Neighbors*. You will face situations that make you afraid or fill you with sorrow, just as the disciples Peter, James, and John did. *Transfiguration Moments*. They will never be alone. For as Jesus helped the disciples stand up on the mountaintop, He will help them.

In a few moments, as part of the ordination liturgy, Moderator Eric Walts will ask the congregation this question: *Do we agree to pray for these deacons, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is the head of the church?*

Church, let us answer with a confident and robust YES.

Transfiguration Moments. They are not just for the Deacons. They are for all of us.

I see them as some of you face the loss of a spouse—your best friend—day after day, you choose to get up, to follow Christ, to allow the glory of God to shine in your lives, even while you live with grief and great sadness.

I see transfiguration moments in parents who faithfully pray for and love a teen struggling with mental illness and drug abuse. Always awake to the possibility of transfiguration.

I see them in a young adult who kept showing up to serve others in spite of losing her own job repeatedly. Knowing that transfiguration was ahead. She actively looked for the glory of God in spite of her difficult circumstances.

I see a woman faithfully fulfilling her commitments at church in spite of her husband disappearing behind the veil of Alzheimer's disease. Working alongside her is like being covered with the glory of God. She radiates light in spite of her circumstances.

Second Church, you inspire me. This is all of you.

May we be alive to the light of God's glory in Jesus Christ just as Gabe and Jude were as they gave their allowance to the Pantry.

Just as Elroy was in his kindness and care for Tim O'Brien.

Be alive to transfiguration moments. They are all around us. Look for them. Share them with one another. The glory of the Lord is in our midst. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.