



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

February 19, Transfiguration Sunday (Last Sunday after the Epiphany)

By *Ched Myers*

2 Kings 2:1–12

Psalm 50:1–6

2 Corinthians 4:3–6

Mark 9:2–9

Introduction The Feast of the Transfiguration probably dates to the late Roman period. A major feast in the Eastern Church, it was not widely practiced by the Western Church until the ninth century. August 6 was designated as the feast day for the whole church in 1456. The Roman Catholic Church today also commemorates the transfiguration on the Second Sunday in Lent, but the Revised Common Lectionary puts the story at the Last Sunday of Epiphany. The latter position, which recognizes the transfiguration's close relationship to Jesus' journey toward the cross in the Gospel narratives, is my focus here.

Psalm 50:1–6, 2 Corinthians 4:3–6

Today's psalm hears YHWH's thundering voice that refuses to keep silent in the face of injustice. This motif invites the listener to imagine the "tone" of the voice from heaven at the transfiguration. Was it commanding, as heard by Moses on Sinai, or "still and small" as experienced by Elijah on Mt. Horeb? Is it surrounded by "fire and tempest" as in the psalm, or plaintive in its plea to the disciples (and the reader) to embrace fully the way of Jesus (Mark 9:7)? No doubt all these modalities are necessary in the long biblical saga of YHWH's appeals to a wayward people to be faithful to the vocation of *tikkun olam*—repairing the world. The cosmos may share the divine passion for justice (Ps.50:6), but too often we in the churches do not, because we (like disciples in both testaments) are preoccupied with personal anxieties, distracted by spectacle, and fixated on ladder climbing.

Today's epistle speaks to this conundrum. To those "blinded" by "the god of this world," Paul warns, the gospel is "veiled" (2 Cor. 4:3–4). It is crucial to understand that Paul is not speaking here about those "outside" the church (much less categorically about Jews). Rather, he is addressing the struggle for truth *within* the Christian community, which includes those who disingenuously "cheapen God's word" (NRSV "falsify," v. 2).ⁱ In Corinth the apostle addresses a community not unlike our churches in the United States: stubbornly self-focused, largely domesticated under empire, and thus gullible to preachers who identify faith in Christ with personal gain.ⁱⁱ For Paul, those who are unable or unwilling to embrace the way of servanthood and the cross have not *truly* seen "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (v. 6)—the very blindness exhibited by the disciples on the mount of transfiguration!

The challenge to our churches is to nurture the psalmist's thundering passion for justice that "does not keep silence" (Ps. 50:3), on one hand, and to be clear that this carries a cost, on the other. There is no more widely prevalent or negatively consequential "cheapening" of the gospel in North America than the notion that following Jesus will improve our personal prospects and guarantee happiness and success. Such "hucksters of



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the word of God” (NRSV “peddlers,” 2 Cor. 2:17) are building tabernacles to the glorified Christ without *listening* to his call to a discipleship of the cross. Mark’s Gospel is the best corrective to those so blinded by the gods of entitlement and privilege that they proclaim Jesus as a patron rather than a victim of empire, and think that justice can wait until the next world.

At the same time, there is no quick or painless way to achieve social and economic sustainability for everyone, or racial or gender equity, or an end to exploitation or war making. This work requires patient and committed organizing and action, and the ability to persist in the face of discouraging results. Martin Luther King Jr. remains the most exemplary advocate of this sort of discipleship. His insistence that “we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” echoes Psalm 5.ⁱⁱⁱ But King was a follower of Mark’s Jesus who embraced his own Calvary in Memphis because of his unwavering commitment to the poor and to nonviolence, which he placed above the political calculus of popularity polls and favorable press.

King was America’s greatest public prophet, yet, as a devotee of Howard Thurman, maintained a mystical relationship with the Divine. Such dialectical faith characterized other great saints in the struggle for justice and peace in the modern church as well, both the famous (e.g., Dorothy Day, César Chávez, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and the forgotten (e.g., Fannie Lou Hamer, Tom Fox, and Julia Esquivel). This balance of engagement and contemplation is both demanded and nurtured by a Gospel story that embeds the experience of transfiguration at the heart of a journey toward the cross. King dramatically bore witness to such faith in his deservedly famous last words on the eve of his assassination, in which he invoked Moses, Elijah, and Jesus on the mount:

We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now.

Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. . . . I just want to do God’s will.

And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain.

And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land.

I may not get there with you.

But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. . . .

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.^{iv}

ⁱ See my forthcoming comments on 2 Cor. 3:12–4:2, the epistle for Transfiguration Sunday, Year C.

ⁱⁱ For a concise portrait of Paul’s context in Corinth, see Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, vol. I: *New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), chapter 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ This quote appears in several of King’s speeches, the latest being the final sermon he delivered



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before his assassination in 1968, “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution” (in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986], 277). The thought dates back to Rev. Theodore Parker in 1853.

^{iv} These words closed his “I See the Promised Land” address at Mason Temple, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968; found in Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 286.