

15 February 2026
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, Rector

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 2

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

In the Name of the God of Light: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Matthew tells us that Jesus “was transfigured before them.” The Greek word is not fancy: *metemorphothe*, from which we get the word metamorphosis, meaning “changed.” Through metamorphosis, a caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

This is what seems to happen to Jesus. The caterpillar Messiah – poor, persecuted, and had nowhere to lay his head – is suddenly changed into a butterfly. The Epiphany season that began with the beaming of a star now ends in a blinding vision of Jesus.

But what are we supposed to do with a vision? Today there is no preacher with parables, no prophet on a donkey. We are people of the ear, trained (and these days encouraged by the government) to distrust the eye. “Faith is an acoustical affair,” said Martin Luther. “Stick your eyes in your ears,” he said, and just believe.

There are some Christians who think about the Transfiguration as being pointless, because Jesus isn’t doing anything; today, Jesus, along with Moses and Elijah, just is. But, pointless?

In his memoir, *A Whole New Life*, writer Reynolds Price tells about a vision of Jesus he had in the early morning hours of his first radiation treatment. Jesus appeared to him, bathed him in water, forgave his sins, and healed him. When we hear these stories, the analytic mind pounces immediately: Was this real, a dream, or a hallucination, perhaps the product of that liminal space between sleeping and waking?

But, why ask? Let’s call it a gift. Throughout his long ordeal with chemo, radiation, drug dependency, searing pain, panic attacks, and irreversible paraplegia, Price refers six different times to his vision of Jesus and its power to sustain him. Nowhere does he use the word *pointless*.

You can live a long time off a vision. Just ask Reynolds Price. But we are called to do more than wait for a vision to visit us. We, too, must look. It’s why we have icons and sculptures of divine things, why we have art that reminds us who we are: so we can look and see. Often, we are drawn to look at something that seems familiar;

something that looks like us. But, like Narcissus, we can get stuck looking only at ourselves, and cannot or will not look beyond the surface of the mirror.

Other times, we are drawn to something that is, let us say, familiar-plus. Our stunning Christus Rex is a perfect example. It is completely understandable that Caucasian people would see Christ reflected in their own image. But in this place, somebody or somebodies heard the loud whispering of the Holy Spirit saying, “there’s more behind the mirror. The reigning Christ is deeper and truer than a white Jesus.”

And so, this Christus Rex had a makeover, giving us a figure that is a more accurate reflection of Jesus’ own human heritage, and whose arms that hold us all are seen to be open to more of the world. One of the first tales I heard when I interviewed here was from someone who was struck and overjoyed that “the giant Jesus wasn’t white.”

So, there we have familiar and familiar-plus, with some caution. There’s the danger of pride that we’ve done all the work that needs to be done because our Jesus is brown; or getting stuck in front of the mirror that this joyful banner contains the fullness of everything (including a Muppet named Grover) that can be said about this parish community.

There is much else in this world we must look at, from which we dare not avert our eyes. And we ought to give God great thanks for those who show us the light of a better vision.

One of those people was the most photographed person in all of the 19th century. But it was not Charles Darwin, or Henry Ford, or Helen Keller, or Walt Whitman, or Emily Dickinson, or Mark Twain, or even Abraham Lincoln. It was Frederick Douglass, the brilliant and gifted abolitionist, orator, writer, newspaper publisher, and politician, whose feast day we observe on Friday, February 20.

Douglass was born enslaved in 1818. When he was 20, he escaped to the North where he connected with abolitionists in New York and Massachusetts. They immediately recognized in Douglass an incredible skill for writing and speaking, and he began to work for the cause of black freedom.

At the time, many found it hard to believe that such a great orator had once been enslaved. In response to such disbelief, Douglass wrote his first autobiography in 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

The book was an immediate hit, especially in Europe. For the first time, here and across the ocean, many could read about the institution of slavery from the point of view of one who had enslaved, and in beautifully written language. Through his writings, speeches, his newspapers, and his involvement in government, Douglass’ mission was to change popular perceptions about black Americans.

One of his chief strategies in that mission was photography – photographs of himself. In Douglass' day, as well as our own, black folks were usually depicted as caricatures and stereotypes, with exaggerated facial features. But Frederick Douglass, through more than 160 photographs, presented himself as dignified, regal, and confident. In so doing, he helped transfigure the public perception of himself, and black Americans everywhere.

Douglass understood that we see not only with our eyes, but also with our expectations. We see what we expect to see. If we expect to see a caricature, that's what we'll see. If we expect to see dignity, that's what we'll see. Without some divine inspiration and intervention, we see only what we are looking to see.

So we need to look beyond the familiar, or even the familiar-plus. We have to look at the unfamiliar. We have to look at the painful: dying children in Sudan and Gaza; the ongoing destruction in Ukraine; the normalization of government-sponsored violence, whether it's physical violence on the streets of the Twin Cities, or verbal violence in the halls of Congress. It can feel overwhelming and terrifying, but we are called to look and to be transfigured by what we see.

It is our common calling to look beyond the mirror of our own lives, keeping an eye on injustice by the light of a better vision – the vision the Magi had of the Christ Child; the vision of the Transfigured Christ. I wonder if that's what Rep. Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House, was reaching for on January 6, 2021, when she reconvened Congress after the Capitol had been cleared of the mob and its chaos. Her first words were, "Today is Epiphany."

You can live a long time off a vision, but we are called to do more than wait for a vision to visit us. The question for us this morning is: are we looking for it? Are we looking for transfiguration? In each and every moment, in each and every person, in each and every experience, Christ is present. And if we look for him, then those everyday experiences will be transfigured before us to show the light of Christ. If we look with the eyes of our heart, our vision will move beyond the surface of Narcissus' reflecting stream, becoming a telescope showing us things we have never imagined, and becoming a kaleidoscope of all that God dreams for us.

Every person we meet will become an image of Christ if we but look for it. Every experience of pain or frustration will hold the presence of Christ if we but look for it. Every part of our broken or aging bodies will become bits of Christ if only we look for them. But only if we look for them. Just as we promise in our Baptismal Covenant, to "seek and serve Christ in all persons."

In some ways, that's exactly what Frederick Douglass was doing with his photography. He was helping people see the holy in their black neighbor. He was

helping people look for dignity and beauty where before they had not seen it. Douglass was helping to transfigure Christ before his society so they could see him in every human being.

What do we see when we look at our neighbors? What do we see when we look at people different than us? What do we see when we look at ourselves? Do we see dignity? Beauty? Holiness? Do we see Christ?

If we but look for Jesus in the world around us, then like Peter, and James, and John we will see Christ transfigured before us. And, wherever we are, it will be good to be there. Amen.¹

¹ Profound thanks to two colleagues: St. Louis native, the Rev. Dr. Richard Lischer, <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/seeing-clarity>, and The Rev. Derek M Larson, TSSF, for his thoughts on Frederick Douglass. <https://derekmichaellarson.com/homilies/frederick-douglass-looking-for-the-transfiguration/>