

Transfiguration Sunday
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I hope that you've had the pleasure of watching starlings flock together above Lake Michigan. Several times in the last few years, I've watched huge, dark columns of birds paint enormous shapes in the sky—sometimes circles, sometimes spirals, sometimes shapes we don't even have words for. It's stunning to watch this huge beast in the sky, hundreds of birds flying in perfect formation centimeters from one another, somehow knowing when to turn, somehow not crashing into one another.

I was listening to a podcast the other day on complexity theory, and the guest lecturer—a pathologist and a 30 year practitioner of Buddhism—was trying to push against the listeners' ideas of reality. He used a flock of birds as one example to get at his broader point. He said that, from far enough away, a flock of starlings seems to be one creature, one thing. It's only when you come a little closer that it's clear that thousands of individual birds are making up the system. And, for most of history, we were pretty comfortable thinking of the most important unit, the most meaningful unit, as the individual bird.

But the good doctor pushed a little. He said that if you look into the bird, you start to notice that it's made up of organs. And when you go into the organs, you begin to see cells. And inside the cells are organelles. And inside them are molecules. And inside the molecules are atoms. At each level of scale, it's really tempting to think that you've uncovered the entire story. But, really, where does the bird-ness of the bird reside? In the feathers? In the cells? In the atoms? It's kind of a big question.

I learned that when you go far enough down, you find subatomic particles, and you even start to find little pieces of the universe that don't seem to experience mass or time the same way that larger particles do. At those very tiny levels, things get awfully strange. And, I think the lecturer's broader point was this: as you get really, really small, it quickly becomes clear that there is not much difference between one bird and another. Between the bird and the air. Between the bird and the lake. Between the bird and you. At the very smallest level, all that is, was, and will be is one. Which of course is what the world religions and the mystics have been driving at for centuries. It's not a surprise to me that a scientist who is also a Buddhist chooses to explain the world this way.

In the Gospel this week, we find Jesus on top of a mountain. He is there with a few of his disciples. And in one of the stranger episodes in the Bible, Jesus' face begins to glow, and his clothes shine white. There are a bunch of ways to think about this. Moses walked into a cloud to talk to God on Mount Sinai, and his face was shining when he came out. So maybe Jesus is the new Moses. Or, you might like that this glowing, this transfiguration, is one of the ways that we—the hearers of the story—can begin to understand that Jesus' nature is divine. He's not just a regular teacher in the ancient near east—he is somehow a piece of God. Or, you might just think

about this as Jesus leveling up, becoming more powerful in his ministry—sort of like a rabbinic Gandalf.

In the Nicene creed that we often say together, we use the phrase “of one being with the Father” when we are talking about the nature of Jesus. We are saying that Jesus and God are of one being, of one essence. Lots of Christians have fought over this idea for years before landing on the formula of Jesus’ divinity that we preach now. But I think it misses the point of the story of the transfiguration to try and turn this into a science experiment, to try to see under a microscope if the glow of Jesus is the same as the glow of God.

Instead, I think what the story of the Transfiguration might teach us is a little something about our own nature. It’s easy for us to think that there is a separation between us, between humans and Jesus; between humans and God. But I think there is a deeper truth, a spiritual truth.

I believe that when we look deep underneath our cells, we find that we are made in the very image of God. I think that if we look closely, we will find that we glow a little bit as well. The separation that we sometimes feel from God is an illusion. We are closer to the divine than we can imagine.

This might be hard to believe when we’re doing the same old school run with the kids, or waiting for news of a biopsy, or even brick by brick getting a new parish hall built. These can seem awfully mundane. But, as Christians, we believe that the Christ event has made the world new. For Christians, the whole world glows because the whole world has been redeemed and indeed transfigured by God.

And this, of course, has serious implications for how we treat one another and how we treat all of creation. You and the earth are made of the same divine stuff. You and your neighbor are made of the same divine stuff. You and the refugee are made of the same divine stuff.

I was sitting at a bar while I was on vacation, and I was having a really nice conversation with someone. We were pretty deep into the conversation when a stranger kind of butt into our talk. And, in a moment I’m not terribly proud of, I was a little short with the stranger, because I noticed he was sort of taking away from the lively conversation I was enjoying. Then, my conversation partner very graciously welcomed the annoying stranger into our talk, and all of a sudden a two-person conversation became a three-person conversation. I still found the stranger kind of bland, and I still didn’t want to talk to him really, but I was super impressed by the grace that my conversation partner showed. I believe in that moment that I was not able to recognize the divine transfiguration of the stranger. I couldn’t recognize that he—annoying as he was—was the same spark of God that I was. And later I really had to do a bit of repenting and a bit of “I’m sorry” to God because I didn’t think that my actions were in line with what I knew to be true. That guy who I found annoying and I are the same. We’re in the same flock. We’re made of the same stuff. We glow the same.

The sin of Christianity is not that we are somehow rotten. Our sin is that we are forgetful. We forget that every particle of us has been redeemed and made holy. And if our sin is forgetfulness, then our task is to remember. And this is the space where we work that out—through service and

sacraments; through prayer and meditation; through repentance and grace. These are the tools that jog our memories so that we can proclaim, every day, that we are connected to every piece of God's transfigured creation. So that we can remember that we fly like the starlings and we glow like Jesus. Amen.