



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Thin

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 26, 2017  
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9*

We are just a few days away from the Church's penitential season of Lent, which begins this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. When I moved from the Baptist Church to the Episcopal Church over thirty years ago, I learned what "liturgical" meant. Among other things, "liturgical" meant having church seasons. Just as our calendar year has seasons (winter, spring, summer, fall), so, I found, did the liturgical year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost (also called Ordinary time or "the long green season").

Since the Feast of the Epiphany (the twelfth night of Christmas, when the magi arrive), we have been in another "ordinary time," which lasts until Lent begins. On the Sundays after the Epiphany, we've been hearing Gospel accounts of epiphanies or "showings" or "revelations" of Jesus' identity.

So, with Lent three days away, today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany. In our Episcopal tradition, we always read an account of Jesus' Transfiguration on this particular Sunday. The Transfiguration is a major story and image from our biblical tradition. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell this mysterious story of Jesus' Transfiguration. Other parishes may simply hear the story and have to use their imaginations. St. Bartians have an advantage ... that's exactly the scene depicted in the great mosaic over our high altar. You can see Jesus in the center, in clothes dazzling white, with rays extending out to show how everything was shining brighter than the sun. Peter, James and John are on your right, Moses and Elijah on your left.

Our great mosaic shows this very story we just heard from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus takes Peter and James and John (his inner circle) up a high mountain. "High mountain" is Bible code: important things happen on mountains. Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Matthew's audience would have known the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) backwards and forwards. When they heard "high mountain" and "face shone like the sun" and "bright cloud," they would have immediately thought of Moses. Mysteriously, Moses and Elijah are there, too. "Dazzling white clothes" would have called to their minds angelic beings.

All these add up to: something exceptional is happening here! "... the glory of Jesus as God's chosen is fully revealed in the image of his shining radiance on the mountain." Jesus' essence is clearly revealed. The Transfiguration recalls Jesus' baptism on one side and Jesus' resurrection on the other. [\*] The Transfiguration is in the middle of these bookends.

I've spent some time this week trying to imagine what it would have been like to be on that high mountain with Peter and James and John ... and Jesus. What would you have done if you had been there? Suddenly, mysteriously, blindingly, you see Jesus transfigured before your eyes. Then you are overshadowed by that bright cloud, just as Mary was "overshadowed" by the power of the Most High at the Annunciation. [\*] You hear that voice from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

What if we had seen Jesus' face, brighter than the sun? What if we had found ourselves in that bright cloud? What if we had heard those words? What might we have done? Upon reflection, I decided that falling to the ground, overcome by fear, was the appropriate response.

Transfigured, according to Merriam Webster's online dictionary, means "to be transformed, changed, particularly into something more beautiful and elevated."

We may not experience something as dramatic as this scene of Jesus' transfiguration. Or we might ... But I believe we do see and experience transfiguration/transformation in quieter, everyday forms around us all the time.

Have you ever seen the face of one person light up when s/he sees her/his beloved spouse or lover or child? Then you have witnessed transfiguration. Have you ever seen a lonely person blossom and flourish when they experience being loved? Have you ever seen a spoiled, troubled young person grow over the years into a faithful, loving spouse or parent? Then you have witnessed transformation.

Sometimes a good Buddhist walks into an Episcopal church ... and is gradually transformed into a member of the Vestry. Sometimes a good Episcopalian walks into a Buddhist temple and is gradually transformed through meditation in community.

Transfiguration/transformation is often easier to see in others than in ourselves. But sometimes we might even catch a glimpse of transformation/transfiguration in the mirror.

There are always forces at work that have the potential to transform us, sometimes for the better, but not always, especially if we are not conscious of them. Illness, misfortune, oppression ... these can turn us bitter and hard and self-absorbed. So can wealth and privilege. Illness, misfortune, oppression ... these can turn us compassionate, generous, humble. So can wealth and privilege.

If we are at all open to others, to experience outside ourselves, then we are constantly being transformed. It's just a matter of by what or whom. I have news for you: the more time you spend in here, the better your chances of being transformed!

It may not seem so. But showing up here week after week, encountering others here, having the scriptures and prayers and sermons and music wash over you, taking the bread and wine into yourself week after week... well, one never knows what may happen.

On this last Sunday after the Epiphany, Jesus' Transfiguration reminds us of who Jesus is: God's beloved Son, sent to help us learn and re-learn over and over again that each of us is a beloved child of God. Sent to help us learn and re-learn over and over again how to love each other as Jesus loves us.

Then there's that detail of the Transfiguration story: when Peter and James and John have fallen to the ground overcome by fear, Jesus—the Jesus they knew, the Jesus who knew how afraid and imperfect they were and loved them still—that Jesus came and touched them, and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid."

Goodness knows, there is much in this world to be afraid of. Goodness knows, this world is much in need of transformation—every bit as much as it was in Jesus' own day.

The light on that mountain—the light shining from Jesus’ face, from his clothes, from that bright cloud—that’s the light of Christ. The light that has come into the world. The light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

Brother Curtis Almquist of the Jesuit order SSJE in Cambridge says this: “We’ve been given the light of Christ not to hoard, not to squander, but to receive, to allow to penetrate the deepest crevices of our own darkness and shadows, and then to reflect this light. This is the light we identify with the countenance of Christ, the light of the world, the enlightenment of our soul. Receive the light; ... mirror that light with all God’s generosity to the whole of creation.” [\*]

When we receive the light of Christ and reflect the light of Christ, then God is mysteriously working through us—even scared, imperfect us—to continue transforming this world into the world God dreams of.

In Celtic mythology, there is the notion of “thin places,” places in the universe where the visible and invisible, where our world and the realm of the spirit, come closest to each other. Mountains, rivers, sacred worship sites are often thin places. A thin place may also be an unlikely place: a bar or crowded city street. We might seek out a thin place. But sometimes we stumble into a thin place. And sometimes a thin place finds us. [\*]

That mountain where Jesus and Peter and James and John were turned out to be a thin place. People often tell me they experience St. Bart’s as a thin place. They feel it the moment they walk in here, even when they’ve never been here before or don’t know anything about it. St. Bart’s has always felt like a thin place to me. This holy table, around which we’ll gather in just a few minutes, is the thinnest place of all. When we gather around this table together—joyous, afraid, imperfect us, just as we are—then our world and the realm of the Spirit meet. Separations dissolve.

Lent begins on Wednesday. I offer a few ideas for you to take into Lent with you:

May we experience Lent as a “thin” time. May we become transformed into “thin” people—not by giving up chocolate, but by putting aside/shedding whatever keeps us from beholding God’s light and reflecting God’s light. May God’s morning star rise in our hearts!

[\*] *Synthesis*, Year A, February 26, 2017.