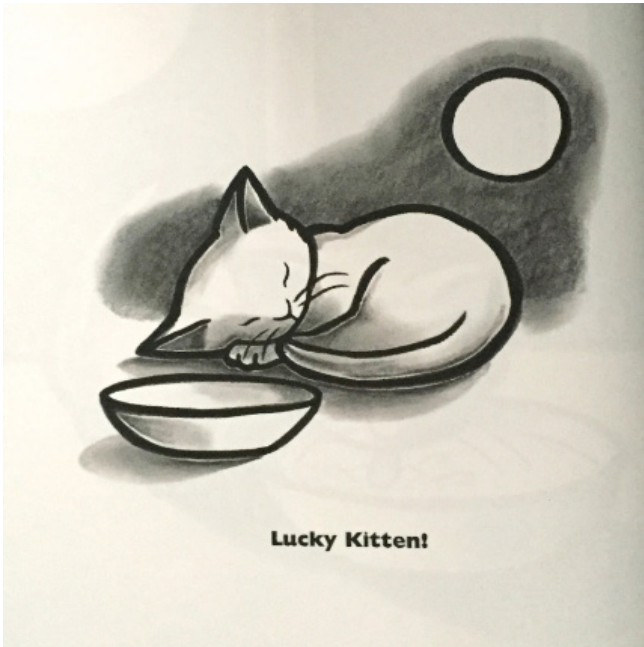


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The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

The Transfiguration

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Lucky Kitten!

Have you ever been cutoff midway through telling a story, the other person hastily drawing a wrong conclusion, and you just want to say, there's more to the story? Have you ever been listening to a friend talk about the world, or a conflict, or a hot-button topic, and proceed to just skip from one generalization to the next like a frog between lily pads, and you just have that thought – there's gotta be more to the story?

At bedtime these days Addie and I have been reading the literary thriller entitled *Kitten's First Full Moon*. It's a story about a kitten who mistakes the moon for a big bowl of milk, and chases its reflection around the house, until the journey takes the kitten outside, where seeing the reflection of the moon on the water, decides to leap in for it. This is the part of the story that is just absolutely crushing to Addie; oh no, the kitten has fallen into the water. Addie will fixate on this page, and she'll ham up these sad, crying faces, as she plaintively pleads with the kitten, "Out, out." I'll try and tell her that the kitten gets out, that we just need to turn the page. There's more to the story, Addie. But it is very hard for her, so anguished by kitten's failed attempt to secure the milk, even after we've flipped the pages, she's still wounded by the one page and will keep flipping back. It touches me to see how much my daughter cares for the welfare of animals, and I hope that stays with her. What she needs help with is realizing that there is more to the story. That's what the Transfiguration is all about.

One of the ironies of Mark's gospel is that the disciples don't get it; they can't perceive who Jesus is, while many outsiders do. The first figures who name Jesus as holy in Mark's gospel are the demons. It's the religious leaders who perceive Jesus as a threat, knowing as they do his supernatural origin. When Jesus dies, and the disciples are nowhere in sight, it is a Roman soldier who confesses him as the Son of God. It's those closest to Jesus who have the hardest time seeing him – they think he's come to make them powerful and summon forth their creative deeds.

One of the great mysteries of Mark's gospel is that often Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone about who he is. Scholars call it the Messianic Secret. One of the reasons I think Jesus tells his disciples not to disclose his identity is because his disciples fundamentally don't understand his identity. Like the kitten springing into the moon-reflected pond, the disciples keep belly flopping into the waters of their own ignorance. There's more to

the story than any of you can understand.

But here on the Mount of Transfiguration they do see something, perceive something of Jesus. They see him light up with the glory of God as he holds a conversation Moses and Elijah. They see how Jesus is joining this Holy Conversation with the prophets of old, and yet it's Jesus on whom we see the spotlight of Glory. Enveloped in this cloud of radiance, having been encountered by the mystery of God, Peter says something very funny, something that was captured in a great meme I saw on Facebook this week. Written by a fellow priest: "Just noticing in this Sunday's gospel lesson that Peter begins that time honored church tradition: facing a terrifying existential threat (the glory of the Lord) by proposing a building project." There he goes again, just belly flopping into the pond. Even with the humor, Peter articulates pretty close to the essence of human folly: we stand before unbearable mysteries everyday and we try to contain them, explain them, domesticate them.

Apparently, Peter knew it was a foolish thing to say – Mark says he had no idea what to say, so he just said something. But the text says the disciples fell silent in their terror. This is probably the most truthful moment in the whole scene. Peter realizing that words are basically useless here. Peter doesn't just see Jesus transfigured in radiance; I think Peter also sees his heretofore ignorance about Jesus. As much as we like, we don't get to use Jesus for our purposes – whether that's some political cause or some free-ticket-to-heaven. No, Jesus will enlist his disciples for his purposes, his causes, and they will be bringing heaven down to the earth by following him.

I have to say, I've always found the Transfiguration tricky to preach. I can sympathize with several commentators who simply ask about this story, "What's the point?". The scholars who ask this don't mean to be sacrilegious. It's just that, in most of the Gospel stories about Jesus, Jesus does something. He is always performing: demons are cast out, sick people are healed, the dead are raised. Wasn't that the point of his ministry? And isn't it still the point, when we think of our own expectations of him? Earlier in Mark's gospel, we have the story of a man with a withered hand. He asks Jesus to fix it, and he does. Now, imagine you (or I) are that person in the Gospel, and a voice from heaven says, "Which would you rather have, a supernatural vision of unspeakable beauty or the use of your right hand?" Most of us

would say, "I'll take the hand." Indeed, so why include this story in the three synoptic gospels? Why does this story, alone of every other incident in Jesus' life, show up twice in the church year – the last Sunday before Lent, and the first Sunday in August?

In ancient representations of the Transfiguration, most notably rendered on icons from the Eastern tradition, Jesus stands upright in flowing white robes, placed against the backdrop of dark colors, perhaps a maroon or deep blue star, all of this action emerging from a black womb-like circle or depth. Jesus, the Son of Man, emerging from the deep, mysterious depths of God, his humanity opening up and out onto those depths, onto that primordial dwelling of the light, to use Job's language. And the eye of the viewer is drawn from the human flesh to the divine depths from which he emerges. Like a musician is infused with the musical idea and inspiration long before she plays the piece, so Jesus is infused with the music of God's life, fully and perfectly his humanity catches the resonances of the divine depth. This revelation of the humanity of Jesus soaked through with the Mystery of God bowls the disciples over like a tidal wave.

And here's what I imagined terrified them. Not that Jesus was transfigured; not the Jesus' life simply opened out onto the dark infinity of divine love. They weren't simply silenced because they realized there was more to the Jesus story. They were silenced because they realized there was more to their story. Like the eye of the icon viewer, they felt the tidal pull of those depths; they were being drawn out of their narrowly defined stories into an identity they could scarcely begin to imagine.

I said a few weeks ago how at our January Vestry meeting, when I asked the Vestry how they wanted to pray for our parish over the coming year, what was shared was a single word, "Grace. That people at St. Anne's might experience grace." I was then talking to Anne about this word grace, and she said very honestly, "We always talk about grace in the church. But I find it kind of a big word with a slippery meaning." Grace is a big word. We talk about social graces. Or graceful musicians or artists. We talk about kind gestures as vehicles of grace. We sing about Amazing Grace, and clergy say things like "Grace and Peace to you all." As I've been reflecting on it, I suppose to experience grace is to let your heart be pierced by the words, "There's more to the story; there's more to your story."

We confess our sins, our sloth, our selfishness, our addictions

to control and comfort. Not to feel bad, or beat ourselves up, but because in consciously confessing them, we realize we are more than them. Our stories are bigger than our shortcomings.

We sing Glorias, and Hosannas, and we raise our hearts to heaven to join the song of the Angels and the Archangels and the whole company of heaven. We likely don't know fully what we mean when we talk about these beings and realities. It's just our way to look at the material world – the world we can see, and touch, and measure, and manipulate – and remind ourselves, "There's more to the story than all this."

We pray for the world – for the sick and suffering – because we know there is more to the story than medicine, hospitals, and doctors.

We engage in social justice. Whether we took the Sacred Ground course that explored systemic racism, or we joined up with Partakers to become a mentor for an incarcerated person pursuing their undergraduate degree, we learn in unforgettable, and perhaps life-altering ways, there's more to the story.

When we baptize children as a community, we make the sign of the cross on their precious foreheads, and we whisper that they are God's beloved, and because they belong to God, there will always be more to their story than what they can achieve or accomplish for themselves.

And yes, what else is the anointing of the sick and the dying but the priest carrying the flame of transfiguration into the darkness on behalf of the community, and gently reminding the family that this might feel like the end, but even now, even here, on the other side of the last breath, there's more to the story?

My prayer for you, and for us, as a community over the next year is to lean into our church family. Get to know people. Listen to memories of who this church has been over the decades. Get to know newer parishioners, and stories about who this church has been over the past few months. In some ways, that's what we are doing, practicing Transfiguration. That is opening our hearts and minds to others, to others experience, and others depth, and catching ourselves saying, "I had no idea that was a part of your story."

And of course this goes for people who've yet to walk through our doors. Look, there are plenty of reasons not to go to a church. Let's not kid ourselves. The church has been at once judgmental

and self-righteous and it has gotten a lot of things wrong. Slavery, women's empowerment, sexuality, creation, colonialism, consumerism – to name just a few. We shouldn't be defensive if the world looks at the church and sometimes wonders if we are more disciples of Jesus or the status quo. The church, if it will be viable for the next 150 years, is going to have get okay confessing its shortcomings. Not from a sense of guilt, but because its been encountered by grace. Because we've been met by someone who has told us that we are more than our faults; no longer owned in guilt by them, we can now own them.

And when we invite people to church, we are inviting them to discover more and more depths in their own heart. We are asking them to consider that maybe their destiny isn't to make a lot of money, or to go to the best school, or even for that matter to simply be happy – it might include this, but one's destiny is to become transfigured by the light of grace of God. To see one's life and emerging from and opening out onto those infinite depths.

So that's my prayer for you over the next year. That in our community, you experience your life opening up a little bit more. When seen through the eyes of Grace; when shared in the fellowship of others; when offered to God in song and sacrament – that you see that there is so much more to the story than what you can conceive.

And here's why you'll need the community of faith. To remind you that the story is actually very, very good.

