

August 3, 2023

The Thirteenth Sunday of Pentecost

Transfiguration

The Reverend Garrett Yates
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



Immediately following the sermon each week many churches, like ours, recite the Nicene Creed together. I rather think the Creed is strategically placed so that no matter how out there, how wacko the sermon was, the church can refresh itself on good, orthodox theology – this might be one of the Sundays we give thanks for its strategic placement. To say the Creed is to enter an ancient conversation that happened in the church in the early 3rd and 4th centuries about who this Jesus person really was, and in particular, Jesus’ relationship with God, the Eternal source of his being. In the year 325 AD, bishops at the Council of Nicaea cast a majority vote against a fellow named Arius - his theology, his interpretation of Jesus - creedalizing, instead, their own beliefs in the words we’ll say in a few moments. In a very real sense, the Church is still offering a reply to Arius, still trying to disentangle itself from his alluring, but ultimately unsatisfying picture of Jesus.

So what did Arius teach? Basically, he thought Jesus was like a hero – a Captain America or Ironman – from the Marvel Universe. Jesus has supernatural capacities to heal and exorcise demons and see into the future; his divinity is almost like a microchip implanted in him that gives him special abilities. Jesus is a supremely strong, heroic leader who came to incite his followers to feats of moral heroism. But, Jesus isn’t exactly God – not God from God, true Light from true Light. It would be impossible, on his reading, to conceive of a human being actually being God. This is not to say Jesus isn’t very special, nor to deny he has very godlike features. Just to underscore: the word that typifies Arius’ Jesus is hero; Jesus is a spiritual and moral exemplar and godlike hero, worthy of respect and emulation.

This morning I want to read the Transfiguration through two lenses, and try and illustrate just how powerful and compelling Arius’ vision of Jesus actually is, and even suggest how much his thinking still endures. So I’m going to juxtapose two Jesus’: I’ll call them the Heroic One, and the Human One.

When you read the gospels, especially some of Peter’s comments and thoughts on Jesus, you can’t help but sense that they thought they were enlisting to follow a Hero, someone who would overturn Roman oppression, and establish, once and for

all, the reign of God on earth. Just before the Transfiguration passage, Peter's messianic hero was predicting his ultimate defeat and loss through his crucifixion, suffering and death. And that's when Peter says to Jesus, *No this cannot be. You can't die. What in the world? Heroes don't die. They save others from death.* And that's when Jesus turns on him and says, *You have no idea what you are talking about. Get behind me Satan!* Jesus rebukes Peter not because he gets the words wrong; Peter does confess him as the Christ, the Son of God... it's that Peter thinks of the words "Christ" and "God" through a heroic lens. So it's literally following that rebuke, as Peter is trailing behind Jesus just after being called Satan, that he and two other companions are led up the mountain to pray. It's almost like the Mount of Transfiguration is a classroom, or a field study in what it means to be a follower of this failed hero.

But on first reading, it's not clear that the lesson comes through. Jesus goes up the mountain and prays, and while he is praying his face changes, and his clothes begin to dazzle as he talks with Moses and Elijah. A divine spotlight pours down onto the stage, and that's when their teacher begins to shine like a rockstar. And from above comes the voice, "Here is my chosen one; listen to him!" Peter, you can just see him, is getting just what he wants: his guy, his leader receiving the divine backing. *Oh this is just wonderful, isn't it? Let's build a place for you and Elijah and Moses to rest for a while; let's enjoy this!* But he still doesn't get it. And perhaps he isn't to blame, because perhaps he wasn't able to hear what Jesus and Moses and Elijah were talking about together. We who have the accounts written down later know, but maybe Peter didn't.

The text tells us that Jesus talks about his departure, that is, he begins to talk about his crucifixion, perhaps trying to gain some understanding about what it might mean for him and his followers. It is significant to me that it's while he's talking about his cross, his defeat, his loss that he is transfigured. If I were choreographing the Transfiguration moment, I would have had Jesus change to bright light while delivering the Sermon on the Mount, or perhaps after Feeding the Five Thousand: a true One Shining Moment. But that's not how it happens. He's appearance changes, he becomes lit up with divine light, as he discusses his

death, his failure.

Now I'm using the word "failure" in a slightly provocative way. We don't often think of Jesus as a failed Messiah. We think of Jesus going to the cross as a demonstration of strength and godlike power, securing salvation for the world. Oh the way he persevered, the way he hung in there with spiritual strength and courage and fortitude; he only appeared to have failed. Maybe Jesus, we concede, wasn't a conquering hero, but he was at least a heroic martyr for the cause who triumphed over his persecutors by his calm resignation in the face of suffering. But he didn't of course. He broke down and wept and sweated with terror that night in Gethsamene. Many spiritual people have faced their suffering with more equanimity and poise – the Buddha comes to mind. We later readers and interpreters of these stories must acknowledge that Jesus wasn't even a spiritual success. His followers left; they all deserted him. Peter, James, and John can't handle the human Jesus' Disfiguration. But perhaps it's when they dare reflect on the Mt. of Disfiguration that the true meaning of this mountaintop experience comes into view.

Herbert McCabe once said, "[For human beings], if you don't love you are dead; and if you do, they'll kill you." As I read the gospels, I don't read about a failed hero, or a heroic martyr. I read a story not about a Superman or a Superhero. What was outstanding about Jesus wasn't anything other than the vulnerable and costly love that poured out of him. Jesus was NOT a superhuman, so much as he WAS more intensely human, more intensely alive and human than we dare to be. He lacked the illusions and deceptions by which we protect ourselves from our humanity, try and protect ourselves from our failure. He was like us in all things but sin, in all things but self-deception. Jesus loved, and loving in this harsh world, gets humans killed. My wondering in all of this is: do we long for a heroic Jesus, a successful Jesus, because that's what we want for ourselves? It's almost like we want a Messiah who saves us from actually having to be human beings.

We live in a moment in the United States where Jesus is being weaponized by many who tell the rest of the world that he is an American-loving Superman sending all those who don't believe

in him to hell. Jesus is a hero of the cause, and his cause will succeed. It's embarrassing, for many of us, to have to share the name Christian with such types. But this toxic type of Christianity isn't really anything new. It's the natural outgrowth of a kind of Arian thinking. The church has never quite been able to get away from the Hero. It's almost like we are afraid of being human.

Well, after the divine light show, and the thundering voice of affirmation from the clouds has concluded, after the old prophets have gone back to their heavenly rest, the terrified disciples are left speechless, and the text says, that then it was just Jesus, the human Jesus there to touch their scared humanity, to help them stand up, and then to walk with them down the mountain.

At this point you may begin to wonder: I thought what sets Christians apart from other religions is that we believe Jesus is divine; that he is God – true God from true God, of One being with the Father? Certainly, that is what Christians believe. But remember that for Jews and Christians to see God, to know what God looks like, you have to look at frail and vulnerable humanity, those made in the divine image. Of course, there are many who say, *no we know God in nature, or the universe, or the flow of history*, or what have you. But Jews and Christians have always directed people back: “to see God you must look at the human face, where the image of God is most potently present.” Even more, to know what a human being looks like, you need to look at the disfigured face from the cross. Vulnerable yet faithful. Abandoned but beautiful. Drained of strength, yet alive in a strange kind of power, reaching out in the agony of love to touch his fellow humans. The cross is many things, but it's not a success story. He is bearing witness to a love that holds us beyond our successes, beyond our achievements. That's what the failure of the cross means, and that's how the cross teaches us, for instance, what the word “God” means: God is the mystery that transfigures the world's failure through love.

The history of the church does, sadly, consist of lot of insiders telling others with different beliefs that they don't belong, slapping the label of heretic on them, and pretending like they no longer exist. The reason that won't work, or one of the reasons it won't, is that Arius wasn't just someone who tried to get the

church to buy into a heroic Messiah; Arius exists in all of us, even those who say the Nicene Creed. Look at my life on any given day, and you'll see someone who secretly, or maybe not so secretly, wants a divine hero to come and save the people who are right from the clutches of the selfish, unenlightened others. We want the successful savior to help our team win, our party emerge victorious from the election; we want a hero to fix the world, and to fix us. We want a savior who will shield us from suffering and failure. But that's not who Jesus is. He is a vulnerable human being, who died not because he was some heroic martyr. He died for being human. More intensely alive, and human than we dare to be. And he came to heal us from the fixation on the hero. We don't need a hero to save us. We need ordinary human love to touch us.

Of course, the cross was not the end of him – this Human One continues to flash forth in the faces of others. And when we see another – not as someone to be saved by our heroics – but as a fellow human being on this messy and muddled and often failure ridden journey we call life, and we reach out, again not with any solution, but simply allow our own messy and muddled humanity to be touched, perhaps that's when transfiguration happens. If Jesus saves us from anything, he saves us from our fear of being human. He teaches us that it's just as we are, and opening ourselves to others just as they are, that transfiguration happens.

We reaffirm our faith each week. We bring our temptations for the Divine Hero into the presence of our humble and human Lord. We repent of the ways we've looked to him for a Spirit of prideful heroism, and instead receive his beautiful Spirit, precious and holy, which gives, as the creed reminds us, not success but life. What we believe about Jesus has large implications for what we believe about ourselves. By confessing a non-heroic Jesus, by confessing his deity on the far side of any achievement, we are making a statement of faith about ourselves too. We are saying that our humanity, our lives, are shot through with divine light, and that light radiates from our very being on the far side of our heroism, so that we too can be transfigured by his life, his life which is light from light, true God from true God.

