
Seeing the Face of God

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

Have you ever noticed how the Bible says no one can see God face to face and live — and then keeps telling stories about people who do? Perhaps what cannot live is our desire to keep everything at a safe distance.

Moses is told he cannot see God and live. Yet when he comes down the mountain, his face is shining. Something in him has been exposed to a reality too overwhelming to control.

Elijah finds God not in wind, earthquake, or fire, but in silence. He wraps his face because he knows he is standing before the Holy.

When God comes close, it is presence. And presence destabilizes the self that needs distance.

That is what the Transfiguration is about.

Jesus does not become something new on the mountain. The disciples see what has been there all along. They fall because the self that wanted Jesus to be useful, predictable, and manageable cannot stand in the light of who he actually is. When God comes close, the illusion unravels — the illusion that we can remain untouched by another's fate, that love can be managed from a safe distance.

Stories That Train the Eye

Mary Hunter and I went to Eddie's Attic recently for John McCutcheon's annual performance. He sang three songs that stayed with me. Each told a true story. Each trained the imagination to see differently.

In the first, a college softball player hits her first home run in the last at-bat of her career — and tears her ACL rounding first base. The umpire rules that if anyone from her own team helps her, the hit becomes a single and a pinch runner takes her place. So two players from the opposing team walk out of their dugout and carry her around the bases, carefully making sure her good leg touches each one. The home run stands. It costs their team a spot in the playoffs.

For a moment, those players see that winning is too small a story for what is actually at stake.

The second song tells the story of the Christmas Truce of 1914. On Christmas Eve, British and German soldiers sing carols across No Man's Land. One side begins Silent Night; the other recognizes the melody even without knowing the words. Soon the singers are climbing out of the trenches, greeting each other, sharing food, passing around photographs of their children.

The war resumes the next day. But for one night, these soldiers can see the humanity of the enemy that the war requires them to ignore.

The third song is titled "Renée Was Her Name." It is less a narrative than a call to remember. Renée was one of the people killed during federal immigration enforcement in Minneapolis — a mother, a poet, a neighbor. She wasn't who they said she was, and she didn't do what they said she did. But the song doesn't enter that debate. It simply repeats her name, again and again. A name sung slowly evokes the humanity of a face. And

once you have seen it, you cannot forget it — regardless of what anyone else tells you about it.

Learning to See

These stories resonate because they are all about learning how to see — or more precisely, about learning how to look at what is and recognize what is trying to be born.

The softball players did not abandon competition; they saw through it to something deeper. The soldiers did not end the war; they glimpsed the Beloved Community inside the trenches. Remembering Renée's name does not tell us what immigration policy should be; it reminds us that we are dealing with real people who are, in most cases, trying to navigate intractable problems in their own lives.

Theologians call this the analogical imagination: the ability to see what is and imagine what could be, both at the same time. It takes practice. It takes work to see how the power being used to hold people down today might be redirected to help them stand up tomorrow.

Minneapolis

Consider what has unfolded in Minneapolis. After enforcement operations began, after three people died and many of us had absorbed some abstract explanation for what was happening and who was responsible, something else happened. People who lived in Minneapolis began to see their city differently.

They did not simply take positions on the moral character of what was happening — they did something about it. Parents organized walking patrols so children could get to school without fear. Neighbors opened churches as supply hubs. Volunteers delivered groceries to families afraid to leave home. Attorneys offered guidance. Students stood together in defense of each other.

They did not wait for permission. They began to build what Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community.

Just as King looked at Jim Crow America and saw not only what it was but what was trying to be born, the residents of Minneapolis looked at a community being torn apart and simply refused to let go of the pieces at risk.

Transfiguration

This is what Transfiguration means. Not a light from heaven, but the capacity to see what is already true but hidden — to see the face of God in the neighbor, to see the Beloved Community taking shape in walking patrols and supply hubs and students holding the line together.

In Minneapolis right now, people are being transfigured. Not because they are becoming something new, but because they are becoming visible to each other in ways the old stories could not hold. The walking patrols are not crisis management; they are practicing trust. The supply hubs are not charity; they are making the Beloved Community concrete.

Hope

This is the work of hope. Not optimism — hope.

John McCutcheon's three songs were not just about learning to see. They were about what people did with what they saw.

The softball players saw that winning was too small a story for what was actually at stake — and then they walked her around the bases. The soldiers glimpsed the humanity the war required them to ignore — and then they climbed out of the trenches. Renée's name restored a face — and the song refuses, again and again, to let it be taken away.

Seeing differently is what happened to them. What they did next was a choice.

Hope is the trained capacity to see what is trying to be born — and then to lend your body to its becoming. It requires practice. It requires the willingness to stand in the presence of another person long enough that the old, familiar desire to keep everything at a safe distance no longer wants to survive.

This is what the disciples could not yet do on the mountain. They saw — and they fell down. They were not wrong to fall. But the Transfiguration was not the end of the story. It was the beginning of their training.

Once you see the Beloved Community taking shape, you cannot walk away from doing your part to let it happen. Once you see how the power being used to hold people down today can be redirected to help them stand up tomorrow, you cannot unsee it.

The question is not whether you have seen enough. The question is what you are going to do before the desire for safe distance reasserts itself.

Amen.