

THE WONDERFUL DAY

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Grace Church in New York
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And while (Jesus) was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. (Luke 9:29)

Every so often, you will hear or read of an event or experience something for yourself that leaves you strangely uneasy. It will cause you to rethink your understanding of the way things are and ought to be. One such event might be what historians have come to call the Christmas truce of 1914. The world had been at war for five months. The great powers of Europe faced each other in a murderous deadlock along the Western Front. In Flanders Fields the trenches were barely a hundred yards apart. “No Man’s Land” between them was a moonscape of mud and barbed wire. On Christmas Eve strange lights began poking above the German trenches. Remarkably, they were Christmas trees complete with lighted candles. The Germans lifted a large banner emblazoned with the English words “Happy Christmas.” In broken English a German officer shouted, “You don’t shoot, we don’t shoot.” A fragile, welcome silence fell across Flanders Fields. A German soldier sang “Silent Night,” and “O Holy Night.” From across the way the Allies joined in the chorus.

Somehow, German and Allied messengers were able to meet. They agreed that on Christmas Day no shots would be fired, and that both sides would be allowed into No Man’s Land to bury their dead. So it was that in the light of Christmas morning they all emerged from their trenches unarmed, and saluted each other. Side-by-side they laid to rest their fallen friends, and even shared a joint prayer service in German and English. They exchanged gifts of Christmas rations. They played a soccer match, with the Germans winning 3-2. They roasted a pig on a makeshift rotisserie, spread a table in the midst of their enemies, and shared the meal. They posed for photographs together.

The Christmas truce of 1914 was a day no one there wanted to see end. It was an otherworldly suspension of insanity. Heaven itself had broken through hostile earthly lines to gain a foothold, and for one day transfigured the most hellish place imaginable. The participants themselves found the experience indescribable. No stranger thing could have happened, yet it was far more true to their nature than crouching in the mud and killing. They wrote letters home calling it “the Wonderful Day.”

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke (9:28-43a), we hear of another such wonderful day. It was a day in the life of Jesus we’ve come to call the Transfiguration. Luke writes how *Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking with him.* Then they heard a voice from a cloud that enveloped them, identifying Jesus to be God’s chosen Son. “Listen to him,” said the voice. Are we to interpret the text literally? Well, Matthew and Mark also record the same event, setting forth largely the same details, agreeing that it was a moment in history, not a dream. For Peter, James, and John, and then all of the earliest Christians, the Transfiguration took hold of their imaginations as a revelation of great spiritual significance. It would be an understatement to say that the experience left them strangely uneasy.

What did it mean? Quite frankly, it seems that the Transfiguration challenged their assumptions about Jesus. They saw Jesus for who he really was – and is. No longer could they regard him as merely a prophet or preacher. He was more than a teacher, a miracle worker, or a

revolutionary. Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. The great story that God had been telling the world for centuries through Israel was coming to a climax in Jesus. *This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*

The experience of the Transfiguration not only enlarged the disciple's understanding of Jesus, it also challenged their assumptions of life and existence, and caused them to rethink their take on the way things really are. You see, over time, as they reflected on their experience of witnessing Jesus' shining in heavenly light, enjoying perfect communion with God, they surmised that they had caught a fleeting glimpse of what human life was supposed to be like. Here in Jesus was human nature as it would have been were it not for the fall from grace. Here was humanity as God intended it: not expelled from the garden, not crouching in the mud and killing, not smeared with sin, not cut off from God, but restored to the life of perfect fellowship with God and each other. It was just a fleeting glimpse, but in that glimpse, they experienced the shock of recognition. They recognized who they were supposed to be. They remembered something they had never known. As such, the moment was a paradox.

When I hear the story of the Transfiguration, and the disciples' puzzling to make sense of it, I think of the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen called *The Ugly Duckling*. You and I who have heard the story many times know what the duckling does not know: that he's not a duckling at all, but a swan. Nevertheless, because he is large and different from all the ducks, the ugly duckling is abused and finally driven from home. He spends a lonely winter on a frozen pond, but then a strange thing happens to the lost little bird. A flock of beautiful large birds appear out of the bushes. They are dazzling white with long wavy necks, and they soar higher and faster than anything the little duckling has ever seen. They are full-grown swans, and upon seeing them the ugly duckling becomes strangely uneasy. He swims round and round in a circle, and calls back to them in a voice that initially frightens him – the voice of a swan. The sight of the swans ignites something deep with the breast of the little bird. He remembers something he had not yet known. It was the shock of recognition that he was created to soar higher, and rise above the pecking throng of ducks that had held him down.

Perhaps the Transfiguration makes us strangely uneasy. But for the disciples it was just a glimpse. The experience didn't last for them and these moments don't last for us, leaving our deepest longing for communion with God ignited yet unfulfilled. Luke tells us how quickly the moment passed. The next day, when Jesus and the disciples had come down from the mountain, they were surrounded by a demanding crowd, including a man whose son was possessed by a demon. It was back to the valley: back to the fallen world of sickness, suffering, and death that made even Jesus uncharacteristically cranky (Luke 9:41). Likewise, as the afternoon shadows lengthened across Flanders Fields on Christmas Day 1914, it would soon be time for both sides to retreat back to their trenches. At the close of the wonderful day a French soldier bid farewell to the Germans with these words: "*Be on guard tomorrow. A general is coming to visit our position. For reasons of shame and honor, we shall have to fire.*" And so they did beginning the very next day and continuing on for the next four years, firing back and forth at each other until millions lay dead.

Such is the world in which we live: a trench, a valley in the shadow of death that some declare is reason enough to deny the existence of God. Does God exist, and if so, where is God to be found? In heaven? The first human to slip these surly bonds of earth and travel in space was the Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin. Upon returning from his historic flight in 1961 the Soviet propaganda machine reported that Gagarin had proclaimed he had seen no sign of God up there. The fact is, Gagarin was a faithful Christian and never said anything of the sort. But a Russian Orthodox priest rebuked the spurious claims of the Communist regime by saying that if you see no sign of God on earth, neither will you see any sign of God in the heavens. His point was that God reveals himself not only on the mountaintops, not only in visions of dazzling light and heavenly glory, but also in the ordinary, everyday occurrences of life down here in the valley. God

is in the trenches as well as in the heavens. Our calling is to be alert to the presence of God even here, in the world of battlefields, slums, hospitals, and prisons. If you don't recognize God "down here," it is unlikely you will recognize God "up there."

It could be that you are not one given to mystical moments. The word of the Lord is rare for you. You have no frequent visions. Mountain-top transfigurations are experiences happen to other, presumably more spiritual people. Even still, you can take heart and be glad. To be sure, none of us experienced the Christmas Truce of 1914, and no living witnesses remain. But they took photos that we can see, recorded memories that we can hear, and wrote words in their diaries that we can read. It was a moment in history, not a dream, not a fairy tale. It happened. So we can marvel at the wonderful day indirectly, and from a distance it can cause us to remember that God intends a much higher life for us, and perhaps for all creation. Nature red in tooth and claw is not the way God intended things to be. That life should devour other life in order to survive is not the way of the kingdom. Rather, God's ultimate will is that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither learn war anymore, and that the earth shall be filled with the glory of God. What is more, in today's reading from 2nd Corinthians 3:12-4:2), St. Paul suggests that we are being transformed into the image of Christ. So the Transfiguration is an encouragement for us to take heart, even if we've never had any experience remotely like it.

The Transfiguration can also encourage us to listen. If God speaks even here in the valley, then our calling is to listen. *This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him*, said God's voice in the cloud. But how? How do we listen for Jesus? Perhaps by paying attention to the very longing deep in your soul – the longing for transcendence and transfiguration. Listen to the strange uneasiness of your spirit. Ask yourself: why is it that we yearn for a quality of life that mortal existence cannot deliver? C.S. Lewis writes that the longing itself suggests we've been made for a different way of being. Put another way, he said that we live in a good world that has gone wrong, but still retains the memory of what ought to have been. Thus, the strange uneasiness we may feel when we glimpse people or creatures rising above the laws of the jungle is a holy thing. It is an echo of the memory of what ought to have been, and by God's grace, might still be.

One of the greatest theologians of the early church was Augustine of Hippo. In his majestic work, *On the Trinity*, Augustine set forth an interesting idea that he called *Vestigia of the Trinity in the Created Order*, or, "Vestigia Trinitatis." Augustine proposed that while the fall from grace mangled the image of God in us and in all of creation, nevertheless traces of God's nature, or vestiges of the Trinity remain and occasionally shine forth. If indeed we are made in the image of God, then remnants of God's perfect Being should still be discernable in human beings. That we love at all is a reflection, or a remnant of the fellowship that that the Father, Son, and Spirit eternally enjoy in heaven. That warring soldiers might climb out of their trenches and celebrate Christmas together is a vestige of the Trinity in the created order.

Personally, I like Augustine's idea of *Vestigia Trinitatis*. It is a concept worth pondering as I listen for the voice of the Son of God, and wait for the advent of wonderful days. It shines a ray of light on the strange uneasiness of the soul that seems to be a universal experience of humankind. To say that the image of God has not been completely annihilated from our nature is to hold out respect for the dignity of every human being. It holds out hope that we might be changed into the likeness of Christ, and even now see signs of the wonderful day on earth.

On the mountain top, the disciples saw Jesus just as he is, transfigured before them. They glimpsed what human nature was supposed to be, and by God's grace might still become. *And while (Jesus) was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

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