

**SERMON**  
**The Last Sunday of Epiphany**  
**February 23, 2020**  
**THE TRANSFIGURATION**

*Matthew 17:1-9*

Mastery of perspective is a skill every artist must have. Perspective is the way someone looks at something. Perspective is about how aspects of a subject relate to one another and to the whole. In the art of drawing, perspective is a technique of representing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface. Lines converging on the page give a perspective of depth or distance. In photography, perspective requires a single angle or point of view from which to sense, or measure, or codify an experience. The sight of a pine tree, from a distance enveloped in the midst of fog on the side of a mountain evokes a much different response than close up, peering through branches at a beetle crawling up its bark. The same tree. Who could imagine. Perspective matters. In storytelling, whether it is a film or a novel, it is necessary for the writer to decide from whose point of view, or perspective, the story is told. The same event told by an elder will be different than one told by a child. Both are correct.

Perspectives matter. The perspectives we have determine our everyday sense of reality—of good and evil, of what we value, how we live— perspective is the stuff out of which we build our hopes or suffer our fears. We all have our perspectives. Most of our perspectives we probably inherited from those we grew up with. More often than not, what gets us in trouble with each other is the clash of our differing perspectives. One of the standard goals in marriage counseling is to help couples understand how their different perspectives might be at the root of their conflicts. Here's how it goes: (It could involve any issue, but let's take "money.") The husband enjoys going out to dinner and traveling. The wife frets about the money he spends and believes he doesn't care about their future. She accuses him of being irresponsible and only thinking of himself. The therapist helps them discover what is really going on. A telling question to answer is, "What was the dinner conversation at the table when each of them was growing up?" Though both grew up in families with similar financial stability, the conversations they heard about money were quite different. In the husband's household, he heard that there was

always enough money to do what is important. The wife grew up with parents who said there was never enough for the basics. It is not surprising that as adults they have radically different emotional responses when the topic of money comes up. Perspectives matter. Perspective is often the unexamined way we see the world. It results in how we judge ourselves and others.

This past week I was taken aback when I went to Atlanta to meet an artist from whom I planned to purchase a painting. I found his work on the internet. The painting I went to purchase is called “Air.” It is the portrait of a young African American woman in an orange dress. There are birds. It is bold in its colors and line. I went to Atlanta, to meet the artist in his studio hoping to get to know him and to learn more about the social perspective of his work. When I got to his studio, he showed me the painting I intended to purchase. The canvas was lying flat on a table. Problem. I didn’t like what I saw. The figure appeared unfocused and messy. I said nothing. He showed me other work around his studio. I tried not to think about my purchase. We went to a restaurant where he and his wife (who is also an artist) and I had wonderful conversations about the role of art in society. Then, the painting was bundled up and ready to transport. When I got home I didn’t open up the painting for a few days. But then, to my delight, when I did open it and saw it upright and framed, it was magnificent. What had happened? What happened was that the painting was created in an upright position. This is the way it was intended to be viewed. When it was flat on a table it was just a canvas and paint. Nothing more. Expensive lesson, I thought. But with a happy ending. The painting is magnificent. Perspective matters.

The story in the Gospel of Matthew, called the Transfiguration of Jesus, is also about perspectives—how they may limit us or free us. Perspective matters. The perspective in Matthew’s gospel—the whole of it—is intended to open the eyes of the Early Church—and our eyes—to something, someone radically different. To open our eyes to a bigger picture than we have ever seen before. There are physical perspectives and in this story, there are spiritual perspectives as well. Discovering perspectives is hard work, so let’s take it slowly. Here’s a Taoist story that might help.

There was an old farmer. This farmer had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors

came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically. "May be," the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed. "May be," replied the old man. The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "May be," answered the farmer. The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "May be," said the farmer.

What is your take on this story? Your perspective? Some might say,

"I guess there is no 'good' or 'bad.'

Everything that happens to us is a mixture of good and bad.

You have to just take things as they are."

Others might say,

"Everything happens for a reason,

and worrying about what has or will happen has no effect.

So don't worry, be happy!"

Or,

"Never judge a situation - wait for the outcome."

But these are "old perspectives" speaking. Old perspectives see things from the same old angle—an angle that is myopic—always about ourselves. A new perspective is marked by a radical openness and isn't from our vantage point at all. What if the story has nothing to do with us? What if the farmer is on a different plane, or on higher ground. What if this is a story about always being open to powers greater than our own or living in the present moment? What if the farmer's perspective allows him to experience the breath and depth

of existence? What if he knows he only sees the branches and the bark of the pine tree and believes there is a whole tree and fog and a mountain? Maybe he's no longer looking at his life lying flat on the ground like that painting I saw lying on a table. What if he sees the world upright—full, vibrant, magnificent—as it was created and intended and purposed.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus is something like this. And it is our final preparation before Lent. How are we to understand and be embraced by the story of Jesus' life if we see it only through our own limited perspectives and vision? Like Peter, James and John, our short-sighted, myopic perspectives are like being weighed down with sleep—we can't keep our eyes open wide enough. Jesus took them with him and went up on the mountain to pray. While Jesus was praying “the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white.” Moses and Elijah were also there talking with him. The three disciples struggled to keep their eyes open. Jesus revealed himself to Peter, John, and James—stood upright and showed them the deepest reality of who he is. The story is from Matthew, so he begins with an historical perspective—he stands with Moses and Elijah. Some say they discussed the time and meaning of Jesus' death. From a merely human perspective this leaves us speechless. Perhaps we pack death away not liking what we think we see. Putting it away, for another time—or maybe never—blinds us to the beauty and holiness of his life and of the world, other people, and ourselves. It blinds us to God's presence and the goodness of creation. Putting it away allows us to think only of ourselves and immediate things. If we are all that matters, then this allows us to look the other way or do perpetrate violence to one another and ourselves.

At first, Peter misunderstood.

“Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,  
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

But humanity can never build a dwelling place for God. It is, rather, God who makes humanity the dwelling place of divinity. This is the new perspective revealed in the Transfiguration of Jesus. *Humanity can never build a dwelling place for God. It is, rather, God who makes humanity the dwelling place of divinity.* And this makes all the difference. When we call Jesus the Messiah, it requires that we see him in a new way. It is not about what we do, but about what God does. On the Mount of the Transfiguration God reveals who Jesus is, and who, by grace we are to become. Perspective matters. We do not need to see new things. We need to see the same old things with new eyes. We do not need to hear a different voice. We need to hear the same old voice with different ears. We do not need to escape the circumstances of our life. We need to be more fully present to those circumstances. When this happens, life is no longer lived on the surface—flat on the table. Transfiguration means seeing from a radically new perspective. In these transfigured moments, we come face to face with the glory of God. It is magnificent.

This is why the Church asks us to listen again to the Transfiguration Story every year on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. It is the beginning of our Lenten preparation. Throughout the Season of Epiphany we see God turn his face towards humanity. In Lent we learn to turn our face toward God. One time a photography teacher said to me, “If you want to get the best picture— one that will astonish and surprise you—a magnificent picture— don’t look in front where you always look. Turn around. The best picture is probably where you were not looking. Perspective matters.

AMEN.