

Today's sermon is a meditation

on two different ways of understanding who Jesus is.

There's not really a concrete, practical takeaway, I'm afraid.

But...you might find it useful in those times

when practical, concrete solutions have all failed,

in those time when you reach out to God

because you don't know anything else to try.

I'm offering this meditation on two ways of understanding who Jesus is

because when you're in one of those desperate life moments

it matters who you think you're reaching out to.

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Jesus brings 3 of his disciples up the mountain

and soon his whole body radiates with a pure, perfect light.

And then the GLORY of the Lord surrounds Jesus

and the VOICE of the Lord thunders from the heavens,

“This is my Son, the Beloved - Listen to him!”

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Now right here, your understanding of who Jesus is

can go in two different directions.

In the first understanding, the Transfiguration of Jesus on the Mountaintop
was supposed to be the high point of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Peter, James, and John get a glimpse of the glory of God.

They see with their own eyes that Jesus really is the Light of the World,
and it changes them forever.

In this first way of thinking,
the whole reason Jesus came to be with us
was to show us that divine, perfect light.

And the Crucifixion...the Crucifixion was just a terrible accident,
a human disruption of God's plan for the Word to become flesh
and shine on us until we learn to shine for ourselves.



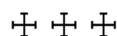
There's a lot to commend this way of understanding Jesus.
There's an innocence to it. An optimism. He came to bring light.
The crucifixion was nothing but an accident of human failing.

That understanding is especially satisfying
if you can blame our rejection of Jesus, if you can blame the cross,
on some other group of people.
The Romans. The Jewish Temple authorities. The People with Power.

In this understanding of Jesus, our job is simply to not be scared of the light
like those OTHER people were, but to embrace it,
to respond to it with a little light of our own.
The path to happiness is to be...shinier. Better. Gooder.

"Every day / in every way / we're getting better and better."¹

Some of you here understand Jesus this way, practice your faith this way,
and honestly, I admire you for it.
This parish wouldn't be who she is without you.



¹ Émile Coué

The second way of understanding Jesus is less optimistic.

More...tragic, really.

This is the understanding of Jesus that rings true to me.

Here, we begin 6 days BEFORE Jesus took his disciples up that mountain.

Jesus has brought them to a district called Caesarea Philippi.

It was built by Herod the Great,

and Herod put a temple there to Caesar Augustus.

So, in the middle of a town built by Herod and standing in Caesar's shadow,

Jesus asks his disciples a dangerous question:

“Who do you say that I am?”

It's like Jesus asking his disciples this question in Tiananmen Square

with the mural of Chairman Mao looking over them.

It's like Jesus asking his disciples this question in front of the White House,

in front of the Pentagon - “Who do YOU say that I am?”

The disciples knew where they were.

They knew people would hear them,

that their answer had consequences.

Finally, Peter says what nobody else will,

says the truth that will one day lead to his dying a martyrs' death:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

In the land of Herod and Caesar,

in the land of Xi and Mao,

in the land of every president from Washington to Trump,

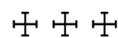
Peter said that there was only one TRUE ruler of all the Earth...

and his name is Jesus.

And it was only then - after Peter found the courage to make his confession -
that Jesus told his disciples the whole truth:
the reason they are going to Jerusalem
is for Jesus to be crucified, and on the third day - raised.

“It’s not about being shiny. Or good. Or better.
Not for the Son of the Living God.
And if you are to be my disciples,
it won’t be about that for you, either.”

“To follow me, you’ll have to take up your own cross.
Those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

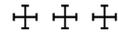


If you remember, that conversation didn’t go very well.
The disciples were angry, confused, and scared,
and for six days they walked around in a fog.

But after six days Jesus
did show Peter, James, and John the glory of the Lord,
did let them hear the voice of the Lord,
and though it took the disciples a while to make sense of it,
eventually they understood that seeing the bright light of Jesus
was NOT why he came to be with us.

The Transfiguration was NOT to show us what WE could be.
The Transfiguration was to show us EXACTLY
who is walking to Jerusalem to be betrayed, beaten, executed,
and on the third day...risen.

Not a wise and courageous prophet. Not a bright and shiny role model.
The Son of the Living God.



It's comforting sometimes to dismiss the Crucifixion as a big mistake,
to think it was never part of God's plan,
that the God we love would never intend for that to happen.

The scholarly way of saying it
is to say you reject the myth of redemptive violence.
Sometimes I wish I agreed with that way of thinking.

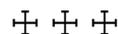
But my understanding is that Jesus took on our flesh
PRECISELY to be betrayed, crucified, and risen.

It was the only way to confront the lie that we are our own gods,
that we have the power within us, the light within us,
to save ourselves.

This lie we tell ourselves - that if I were just a little bit smarter,
just a little bit stronger, younger, richer, holier -
then I could figure out a way to be happy all by myself.

But God did not take on human flesh to show us how
we can all be perfect, too.

No, God took on human flesh to walk the way of the cross,
to show us exactly how far God will go to save us from ourselves.



I said there weren't any practical applications to this sermon,
but I think maybe there's one.

It's so profound - and so common - that I overlooked it at first.
It's kind of hidden in plain sight.

When two people are married we say they become one flesh.

They vow that they will love and care for one another
in sickness and in health, till death do they part.

In the early days of a marriage, those vows seem romantic.

If you've been married maybe you've made little jokes
about making sure one of you doesn't outlive the other.

Emily and I joke like that sometimes.

The reality is often very different.

The reality is that death often comes slowly, piece by piece,
and whether it comes first for you or for the one you love,
walking the long journey of illness and death
can be an awful lot like a slow journey to the cross.

And yet so many times, here at Holy Trinity and all over the world,
couples discover that there is no greater love
than to sacrifice a part of your own life
for the sake of your spouse on his or her journey to the grave.

It's not romantic. It doesn't feel heroic.

Often it's just hard, and sad, and lonely.

But we say at a wedding that a marriage
is a sign of the love that Christ has for the Church.

Maybe that sign is most visible

not at the beginning when things are easy and light,
but at the end,
when their pain is your sorrow,
when their tears are your tears, too,
when you sacrifice your own happiness...for love.

If you have walked this journey,
or if you are walking it now - with your spouse, your child,
your parent, your sibling - it might not feel all that Christ-like.

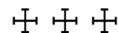
“Of course I’m doing this.

This is my family. This is my own flesh and blood,” you might say.

But isn’t that exactly what Jesus did?

Didn’t Jesus take on human flesh before
so that he could give his own life...for his family?

The HUMAN family. For you. For me.



Lent will be here in 3 days.

You can ignore it if you want. A lot of people do.

But what you could do this year is spend time meditating on
who you understand Jesus to be, and why that matters.

You could see with fresh eyes the hard, liberating, saving truth
that the Son of Man had to be lifted up high on that cross,
that whosoever believeth in him might have eternal life.

And you could prepare for your own time to walk the way of the cross,
which might include sacrificing some of your own life
for the ones who are flesh of your flesh,
for people you love so much
you will give up your own life to help them.

Just like Jesus did.

Amen.