

Last Epiphany B 2021

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

Technically, a picture is the same
No matter what the frame.
But perhaps you have had the experience
Of seeing a picture brought to life,
Or set free to reveal hidden depths,
When set in a new frame.

The words of a great play are the same,
But a different actor can reveal a meaning
We never heard.

And a story –
How does the same story change,
When we hear it in different times and places?
And how does the same story change
When the same hearers are different?

This is the first time
we have heard the story of the transfiguration
as a people in masks.
How is it a new story for us now?

Masks are a fact of our lives now.
First, a year ago,
We were supposed to be saving them for those who needed them.
Then we discovered we all needed them,
So we were supposed to make them,
And wear them,
And learn to live with them.
And now, of course,
We're supposed to up our game.
Wear two,
Or fit them better,
Or both.

All this has been hard.
We've had some fun with masks,
Some of us,
Some of the time.

But for most of us,
It's been dislocating
To lose some of our primary cues and clues
To the moods, thoughts, intentions
Of those we encounter.

I'm leaving aside,
As you will have noticed,
The very real questions
Of whether and where and when
Some among us wear masks
Or refuse to do so.
And questions about virtue signaling,
Mask etiquette, and mask fashion,
Engaging as those questions may be –
At least for some of us.

Wherever we fall on the mask scale,
They are a fact of our lives now,
And they shape our responses to those around us.
“Are you laughing or crying,”
Someone said to me last summer.
“I can't tell.
I hate this,” she said.

Life behind masks is different.
Our appearance has changed,
And we find it hard to cope.
So here's the question for today:
How does masked life shape our encounter
With today's story of Jesus,
Whose image is changed
Before the eyes of his wondering friends?

The glory of God shines
In the face of Jesus Christ.

This truth is revealed
In the moment on the mountaintop.
The disciples see the truth
In a flash that is gone before they know it.
Jesus is the image –
the icon, is what the original text says –
of the living God.

In the transfiguration moment,

The face of Jesus reveals his essence.

In this masked moment,
We feel, some of us,
As though without seeing each other's faces
we cannot discern the truth
About each other,
Or recognize ourselves.
There is no denying this,
Or getting around it.
It's one of the painful challenges of this time.

But masks have not always concealed.
They protect,
They reveal,
They have power.
The masks worn in ancient Greek theater
Were intended to reveal character and emotion,
Rather than conceal it.

And the word the Greeks first used for mask,
Over time,
Became the word for face,
And then for person.
The apostle Paul,
The clever and sophisticated –
And sometimes wise –
citizen of his world,
Knew what he was doing, I am sure,
When he used that word,
Which had once meant mask,
To talk about the glory of God
Revealed in the face of Jesus.
It's an irony that can invite us to wonder,
As theologians have done
Since the early church –
Who is Jesus?

The word for mask,
Then face, and then person,
Was adopted by early Christian theologians
As they struggled to articulate
Some kind of understanding
Of the nature of Jesus,
Who, in the moment on the mountaintop,
Revealed his truth.

If we can know something about the nature of Jesus,
And his relationship to the God he called Father,
Then we can know something
About why he matters to us,
How he enters our lives for good,
What difference he makes to the world.

This wondering is the work of all God's people.
Theology isn't something that happens only
In ivory towers or dusty corners.
It's what happens when you and I,
All of us together,
Wonder about God.
Question Jesus.
Ponder the Holy Spirit.
Think about human nature.
Face the beauty and terror of the world.

The story of the transfiguration
Can be, for a people in masks,
An occasion to think about ways of knowing,
About the power of truth,
About how God enters the world for good.

Doing this kind of theology
Is the privilege and responsibility
Of all the people of faith.
It always matters.
It always invites us into lives of freedom and meaning.
It matters now.

Confronted with political turmoil,
With the bitterness and rancor,
The faint hopes and predictable disappointments
Of the impeachment,
With a plague that threatens our lives
And demands that we examine our actions and choices,
The people of faith
Need a transfiguration moment.

In this time of masks,
We feel,
Many of us,
At least some of the time,
That we don't know who we are.
And we counter that,

All too often,
With the nonsensical claim
That how we act
Is not who we are.

“This is not who we are,”
We say, over and over,
When faced with our actions.
Not only when we confront and condemn the actions of others,
But when we dare to examine ourselves.
But what do we see,
If we dare,
In the clear light of the mountaintop?

Jesus is revealed as himself on the mountaintop –
The Beloved,
In whom all the light of God can be seen,
Shining through his face.
An icon reveals the light within.

But what about us?
What is revealed?

What do we see in ourselves,
If we are truthful?

Our struggle to let go of hatred?

Our unwillingness to make hard changes
To preserve the life of the planet?

Our clinging to ways of life
That work for us,
And not for others?

Our weariness and impatience,
With masks,
With distancing,
With the endless round of posturing and lies
That takes over our common life?

All this shows,
In this time of masks.
We don't need to see faces
To know it's true.

But that is not the end of the story.
Like the disciples,
We can't see the light for long,
And we fumble when we try to respond to it.

But, the truth of the story is stronger than our lies,
Our fumbling,
And our fear.

This is the heart of the story:
There is truth,
Abiding and unchanging,
At the heart of all things.
That truth is knowable.
For us, in the Christian household,
It is known in the light shining
In and through the face of Jesus.
A light that is always there,
Even if sometimes we can't see it.

Even when forceful lies
Insist they need no evidence to back them up,
Even when facts and evidence
Fail to win an acknowledgement of truth,
Even then,
The truth survives.

Like an old-fashioned dark lantern,
The shutter can close,
And though the light shines within,
We can't see it and it casts no light around it.

It feels that way,
All too often, in these times.
And the season of shadows is coming,
In the cycle of our liturgical year.

This story of the transfiguration is given to us now
To comfort and sustain us
Through the darkest hours.

In this time,
Trust that the truth is still there.
Here, everywhere.

Don't give in to cynicism or despair.

Trust that the truth is brighter
Than our polarized – sometimes even poisonous – political life.

Trust that even on our wounded and gasping planet,
There lives,
In the words of the poet,
The dearest freshness deep down things.*

And trust, above all,
The truth of the mountaintop.
The truth of Jesus.
No mask can hide his truth,
No darkness dim his light.

And someday,
We will see the truth, face to face.

*Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”