

Dear friends in Christ



February 27, 2022, Epiphany – Last
Transfiguration Sunday

“Bright and Shiny Church”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36

This Sunday we wind up the liturgical season of Epiphany. Most of our readings have been about the revelation of the Holy in Christ and God’s presence as manifest in the Church – the Body of Christ (see the book of Acts). Our readings reveal Jesus’ presence that turns daily living into the finest wine, and the calling of many to be part of a new faith journey that lives out the Gospel ethic of the Jesus Movement.

I thought I had this sermon well in hand when on Wednesday evening it was abruptly upended. That’s what sometimes happens when the world’s agenda overtakes what one has written on paper, especially when events are of such enormity.

On a personal level, as I contemplated all the dazzle and sparkle of the Transfiguration, I had to face it. In light of the Russian invasion, the detonations and the air raid sirens going off in the background of news reports from Kiev, I’m not feeling much sparkle. This invasion will be a complete and utter disaster for millions.

Putin has threatened to undo all the Post WW II security arrangements and national borders. He trashes the international rule of law that has

kept the peace in Europe for over seventy-five years. There will be millions of refugees flooding into the rest of Europe. Hundreds of thousands will perish in Ukraine.

The Russian invaders are already committing atrocities and war crimes in Odessa. The invasion itself is a violation of the Geneva Convention, making Putin a war criminal. The economic costs are mounting, and soon will be staggering. Only “shock and awe.” No dazzle. No sparkle. Just grunge and devastation.

As one of my sons said on the morning of 9/11, “Dad, I don’t think we can let this one slide”.

Consequences for all will be enormous. What will become of Ukraine? Will Putin stop there? Will sanctions make a whit of difference? Or just amount to a petty annoyance.

We as Americans must gladly bear the costs of sanctions and must be resolute in using all the soft power at our command to bring Putin to the table. We must bear in mind the alternative – a possible wider war throughout Europe with nukes. And whatever happens in Europe won’t stay in Europe.

The efforts of peacemakers will be the radiant transfigured face of those who follow the Way. And if it works, and let’s hope to God it does, my face will be a little brighter. Meanwhile, our hearts and prayers, and all the aid we can muster, must be with the Ukrainian people and those brave Russians protesting this insanity. The insanity of one man!

But for now, we’re betwixt and between. I feel we’re somewhat like Peter in the Transfiguration story – gobsmacked.

In Luke’s telling, Jesus takes his followers Peter, James and John up on the high mountain of God’s revelation to pray. Pray for what, they probably had no idea.

Jesus’ appearance is suddenly dazzling. He shimmers and shines like that first star which led the Eastern Sages to Bethlehem. It is indeed

“Christ of the shining mountains, True and transfigured King.” God speaks almost the same words which began Jesus’ ministry at baptism, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.”

And in the midst of it all are Elijah and Moses, talking to Jesus. Elijah and Moses, harbingers of the Messianic Age. When they appear, a new day is at hand. Better than the Age of Aquarius. Freedom and solidarity will reign in the land.

And poor Peter, he has no idea what to make of it all. He, obviously, skipped Bible class. He is consumed by the experience. He might as well be in paradise. He doesn’t know what to say. He’s like a little boy hauled in before the principal, afraid and stammering.” Finally, he blurts out, “Wow, this is great. Let’s make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Again, he has absolutely no idea what he is saying.

These are strictly Old Testament rumblings: the mountain, the cloud, the voice, the light show, Moses and Elijah. The glory of God is fully manifest in Jesus as culmination of deliverance and justice.

Elijah is the sign of God’s solidarity with us, the prophetic tradition of just dealings and God’s preferential option for the poor and defenseless. When we see Elijah, the time of fulfillment is near and very near.

Moses is the figure of deliverance from all that binds and holds us down from the full stature God intends for men and women.

It was not coincidence that those escaping the bondage of slavery referred to Harriet Tubman, the most famous conductor of the Underground Railroad, as Moses.

Time and again, despite the floggings and vicious dogs, she led hundreds to freedom up North. Following the Drinking Gourd. It was the North Star of that constellation which would lead them to freedom. She was one of the most successful conductors and best known on the Underground Railroad

Yes, go down Moses and lead us all to Freedom Land where all God’s children can sparkle. Go down Moses

Jesus in this revelatory episode, is the embodiment of these two traditions. God's will that we all sparkle like bright shiny beads – that we and all who follow become the Transfigured Christ. That's the divine plan, told down through the ages in both Old and New Testaments.

It is God's will that we, the Church, reflect that same radiant face of Christ upon the Mount of Revelation. God working through us to effect exactly the very same brilliance of Moses as he came down Mount Sinai. As Jesus upon the mount.

And sometimes Transfiguration takes place in the most unlikely of persons. Yeah, people like you and me. People like Fannie Lou Hamer and those of Freedom Summer down in Mississippi in the sixties.

Several Sundays ago I briefly mentioned Fannie Lou Hamer. She was a poor Mississippi sharecropper who, like Harriet Tubman, was also a conductor on the road to freedom as she led her people to the voting booth. She stood powerfully in a prophetic tradition where all count.

Let me tell you how this impoverished woman, with no more than a sixth-grade education, showed up the hypocrisy of a president of the United States and the Democratic Party. I don't say she brought him low. President Johnson did that all by himself. As did a cowardly convention. That convention's own racist behavior in expelling the Mississippi Freedom delegation was its own abject shame.

As King said, "It is always the right time to do the right thing." The power structure of the party failed.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegates, seeking to unseat the regulars on the floor of convention, maintained that they, an interracial delegation, under the provisions of the Constitution, had the right to those seats.

Johnson, and the Democratic establishment was worried that Fannie Lou and her rump group would alienate their White southern, segregationist voters.

Party power brokers threatened, they tried to bribe, they promised all sorts of programs for Mississippi -- if Fannie Lou and her people would just go back home, or at least accept a compromise.

Hubert Humphrey, whose spot on the ticket as VP was contingent upon getting the MFDP group to accept a compromise, pleaded for her understanding on the floor of convention. The compromise would be just two seats out of the sixty-eight allotted Mississippi. And mind you, neither of those two could be Fannie Lou Hamer. That was the deal, just two seats and no Fannie Lou Hamer. Definitely, not THAT woman!

Fannie Lou was aglow with Gospel radiance, Christ-like radiance. She was delivering her people into a new future. Johnson and the Democratic Party had no comprehension of the force they faced.

Fannie Lou was proving to be a most righteous sword of justice that God was wielding through our segregationist laws and racist attitudes, both South and North. Cutting a wide swath of Freedom.

She told Humphrey that if this compromise was the price to be paid for getting all his promised benefits for Mississippi, that he, in the end, would get none of it. The entire MFDP delegation backed her.

When Fannie Lou gave her testimony before the Credentials Committee, her story of what she had endured to be accorded the basic rights of a First-Class American, the right to register and vote – the beatings, the humiliation, the sexual molestation at the hands of deputies and police back home, Johnson realized he was losing the ballgame.

President Johnson called an impromptu press conference in the middle of her testimony. And while the media attention swung to the White House for Johnson's presser, which was a big "nothing burger." Never even mentioned Humphrey, whom most thought would be introduced as his VP choice.

All the while, in Atlantic City, the TV cameras kept rolling. Recording every bit of what Fannie Lou had to say on behalf of her delegation of sixty-eight. Every word. And the ovation which followed. There wasn't a dry eye in the room except for the "regulars," who sat in stony-faced silence during her presentation. Shaking their heads in disgust.

President Johnson thought he had averted a whole bunch of bad publicity. He was wrong. That evening the nightly news programs put out her witness before all of America.

But wait, it gets worse.

Every delegate of the Mississippi regulars, rather than even accepting this minimal compromise, walked out en masse and went home, leaving a block of seats on the floor cordoned off by ropes.

Many delegates, supportive of Fannie Lou and her group, gave floor passes to the Freedom Delegation which, the next morning went under the ropes and occupied that block of seats.

The following day, the MFDP found that all those seats had been unbolted from the floor and taken away. So, Fannie Lou and her group just sat on the floor -- made Johnson and the party regulars look like the chumps they were.

Fannie Lou may have lost her battle for those seats. But that evening on the six o'clock news, she overwhelmingly won the hearts of the American public.

Through it all, with her freedom songs, testimony, Bible references, and encouragement, she reflected back divine, Transfiguration. Her face shone and glittered with Gospel goodness. As did the faces of her delegation. True and Transfigured!

Now this was a Glory Attack if ever there was one!

This story of Transfiguration was preserved not as just a weird, one-off miracle. It is the destiny of God's people. Our destiny. Yes, we, the Church.

Martin Luther King would berate the Church and its leadership for being the taillight of history. We are meant to be the headlight. A true and transfigured hundred-thousand-watt headlight.

Fannie Lou and all who have followed in her footsteps, those murdered volunteers buried in Mississippi's swamps and lagoons, they are the True and Transfigured image of Christ. This is the glory God intends for us. We have but a few days. How shall we use them? To what end?

In San Bernardino, West Virginia and Ohio, that is the destiny of the House of Hope. A transfigured hundred-thousand-watt headlight.

I don't know exactly what happened up on that mountain with those befuddled disciples. I wasn't there. What sort of miracle or apparition they might have seen -- I have no idea.

But I do know about the miracle of some transfigured souls who have come through the tribulation of addiction. They are the living testimony to "once was blind but now I see." I have witnessed their sparkle and shine, eyes wide awake, as they delight in a new rebirth. I have seen that miracle with my own eyes

They, through their recovery, are splinters of light off that same True and Transfigured Christ. We, through our faithfulness, are Transfiguration.

This is the vision. This is the journey's end. What we call sanctified. Now, as we prepare to enter our Lenten journey, let us keep our eyes on this Gospel prize.

And may we do all we can to support our sisters and brothers in Ukraine. And pray for the antiwar marchers in Russia. Blessed are the feet of those Messengers of Peace. Amen