

As we gather this morning, I am sure most of us are feeling the trauma of this past week and we are grieving. As I have been reflecting on the tragedy at MSU, I have also been thinking about the ways in which moments of grief, anger, injustice, etc., sometimes become windows into the divine and then, in those moments, we become changed. That is what the cross is about and this week we will begin to focus more intently on the cross as we move into Lent. As we begin our Lenten journey this Wednesday, the inevitability of the cross looms before us, and there is nothing we can do to change the fate of our Lord. Yet, as we face the cross, and as we face those moments in life when grief is so present, as we face the horror of this past week, it can become a window into the divine. I know this happens because I have experienced it.

As a pastor, I have the privilege of being with you and walking with you during some of the most difficult times and moments of your lives. Quite honestly, it is in those times that I often find God's presence to us to be palpable, and I am always changed. There are times when these moments are truly transcendent moments, **saturated** with God's loving presence. And I always realize that in those times, we are standing on holy ground.

One of those moments for me happened a year ago this past December. As I tell you this story, I will mention that Charlotte Rasmussen has given me permission to share it with you. She and Tom were in Florida for the winter when Tom had a heart attack. Tom was rushed to the hospital and underwent surgery, but complications ensued. Their daughter Ellen, Charlotte, and I were in touch with each other throughout those challenging days. Tom's condition worsened. It was apparent he would not recover, and he was near death. On Christmas Eve day 2021, they called and wondered if we could do a short service over the phone. I had never thought of doing such a thing and quite frankly I was wondering how this would work out, but I said sure. Charlotte's daughter-in-law was able to connect other family members to our phone call while Ellen, Ken and others were in the hospital room with Charlotte and Tom. In those moments, as Tom faced the end of his life, I led the service for The Commendation of the Dying. And in those moments, in the midst of so much grief and suffering, **all** of us experienced the transcendent presence of God. We experienced that window to the divine. Even though we were separated by countless miles, we were one in the body of Christ and we all experienced God's presence to us. We knew we were standing on holy

ground. I will be honest with you. I was forever changed by that experience of Christ's presence to us on that day.

As I reflect on the events of this past week, the event of Tom Rasmussen's death, and the gospel story we are given today, I know the presence of the Risen Christ often appears in times of deepest grief. We experience a window into the divine and we become changed. In today's gospel reading, we find Peter, James, and John accompanying Jesus up the mountain after Jesus has just told them they are headed to Jerusalem where he will be killed. Jesus has told them about his imminent death. It is only human that in their minds they play out the next few days and weeks. Quite honestly, they probably begin to look for alternatives, desperate for a second opinion, a way to stop time. They want to build a sanctuary away from the world, to be content in the moment, saving Jesus and themselves from the heartache to come. However, they cannot do this, and neither can we. Yet, on that mountain, God breaks into their lives and the grief they are experiencing. In the moment of transfiguration, they experience a window into the divine as Jesus' divinity is affirmed. And in that moment, the disciples are given eyes to see God's light in the chaos to come, the chaos of death, loss, fear, and resurrection, all of which would become the work of the early church. You see, the challenge to the disciples, to the early

church, and to us is to live in a world without Jesus' bodily presence. The transfiguration, a word meaning *to be changed*, anticipates this challenge, inviting us to live our days in "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." As that light shines in our hearts, the incarnate God is made real in the every day of our lives.

In the transcendent moments of life, those remarkable moments and times when we deeply feel the presence of Christ, God prepares us to endure the world and its brokenness, the world of the cross, the world where we experience mass shootings in our own community, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is **never** beyond God's redemption. And, sometimes, those transcendent moments even happen in the presence of immense grief, as Charlotte, Ellen and I experienced on that Christmas Eve day in 2021.

The transfiguration offered Peter, James and John the paradox that while there is nothing they can do to save themselves from suffering, there is also no way they can shield themselves from the light of God that sheds hope in their darkest moments. That mountain was the way for God to prepare Jesus' human band of companions for the sacred journey that was to come, to offer something to hold on to when they descended into the crushing reality of the world below.

In this story Jesus is preparing his disciples for the cross – it's going to come, so be ready, he seems to say. Jesus knows it's the only thing that's going to transfigure them, to change them. In that moment in the depth of grief, they experience a window into the divine. And the same thing goes for us as well. You see, suffering has this strange and marvelous ability to pull us into *oneness* and experience the divine. Maybe you've seen it happen in your family, maybe in a moment like the one Charlotte and I experienced, maybe at the funeral of a loved one or some other communal tragedy, maybe even through this past week's tragic experience at MSU, and we discover we are in this together, we are in this together as the body of Christ.

Today's gospel reading marks a pivotal point in Jesus' ministry, and it was a pivotal point in the lives of the three disciples. I dare say that this reading presents a pivotal point for us as we walk through the doorway into Lent. Jerusalem and the cross stand before **us**. This Wednesday, we will be reminded of our brokenness and **our** mortality as we are smeared with ashes and begin traveling with Jesus to the cross. The cross – that place of death and sorrow where we discover a love so big it **envelops** the entire world! The cross – the ultimate window into the divine because it is a place of transforming love, a place that **changes us**.

As our community continues to grieve and move through the trauma we have experienced, one thing I know for certain is that the God who in Jesus journeyed to the cross, also walks **with** us and is present to us in our grief. The moment of transfiguration is that point at which God says to the world and to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or sorrow. However, we also cannot escape the light that God will shed on our path. We cannot escape God, Immanuel, God with us. So, as we still grieve and Lent begins, be open to be **changed**, be open to be transformed, and be open to be made new. May God richly bless our journey!