

Transfiguration C
Luke 9:28-36
March 2, 2025

AshMardiFiguration
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Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

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Today, as we enjoy the sweet sounds of tenor sax, guitar, bass, and voice; as we revel in the excess of chocolate and confection; as we share laughter and joy; we do so acknowledging that we are on the cusp of a new season. The season of Lent begins on Wednesday. But we're not quite there yet, are we? And we're determined to bring the season of Epiphany to a close with a bang!

Epiphany ends much the way it started. At his baptism, Jesus heard a voice from heaven say, “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And at his transfiguration, the disciples heard a voice from a cloud say, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” It feels like that first instance was for Jesus – to allay any doubts he may have been feeling about who he was or what he felt called to do. While that second instance, from today’s story, is about reaffirming who Jesus was for the disciples’ sake. Both were about identity – Jesus’ identity, certainly, but also our identity.

The disciples in the story saw and heard things on that mountaintop that changed their perception of Jesus – that revealed more about the one they’d dedicated their lives to following. It’s very likely that we have had mountaintop experiences of our own that brought new insight or inspired significant growth or change. The story of the transfiguration is about Jesus, but it’s also a metaphor for moments of revelation and discovery in our own lives that contribute to our knowledge of ourselves and our place and purpose in the world. Going back down the mountain, we know we’ll never be the same. And let’s be honest, valley experiences can have a similarly transformative effect on us. Both the mountaintop experiences and the valley experiences of our lives open us to new discoveries, challenge us to change and grow, and teach us lessons about who we are – about our identity.

One of the most profound lessons about our identity, about human identity in general comes to us on Ash Wednesday, the day we put on ash, the leftover carbon of last year’s palm branches, and remind one another that we too are dust and to dust we shall return. And knowing that about ourselves opens us to making the most of this day and all our days. That’s why we celebrate Fat Sunday. That’s the purpose of Mardi Gras: to celebrate today with exuberance, open to all that life has to offer while acknowledging that, among other things, we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Taken together, these three observances – Transfiguration, Mardi Gras, and Ash Wednesday – can have a profound message for each of us. The story of the disciples witnessing Jesus’ transformation and hearing such a clear articulation of his identity, serves as a mirror for our own transformations and an invitation to live authentic lives as the people we are. Ash Wednesday reminds us that among many other things that make us unique and special and beautiful, we are all, at our core, mortal, dust. And, in light of that knowledge, Mardi Gras reminds us to *carpe* the heck out of each *diem* – to celebrate life and all its joys, wonders, and revelries for the beautiful gift that it is.

As we acknowledged at the beginning of the season of Epiphany, each of us is a beloved child of God. We name and claim that for every person in their baptism and it doesn’t change. But throughout our lives, through mountaintops and valleys, we will learn and we will change and we will grow into exactly what that means for each of us. We’re invited to celebrate along the way and to know with peace that the journey won’t last forever.

Identity. Mortality. Opportunity. They all intersect for us today. They bring today into sharper focus. Know who you are. Remember that you are finite. Live intentionally and gratefully and joyfully out of that knowledge, welcoming each day as a gift.

Known as “The People’s Poet,” Edgar Guest articulates this better than I. He writes:

Life is a gift to be used every day,
Not to be smothered and hidden away;
It isn't a thing to be stored in the chest
Where you gather your keepsakes and treasure your best;
It isn't a joy to be sipped now and then
And promptly put back in a dark place again.
Life is a gift that the humblest may boast of
And one that the humblest may well make the most of.

Get out and live it each hour of the day,
Wear it and use it as much as you may;
Don't keep it in niches and corners and grooves,
You'll find that in service its beauty improves.¹

May it be so with us. And happy AshMardiFiguration. Amen.

¹ Edgar Guest. "Life," Yourdaily-poem.com: https://www.yourdaily-poem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem_id=4437.