

## **Matthew 17:1-9 - Transfiguration Moments of Glory**

Proclaiming the glory of God, the glory of the incarnation, is the business that we are in. Every congregation, every person – is in the business of healing and feeding, serving, loving, and respecting the dignity of every human being in God's glory-haunted world.

Glory is the wonder-filled transfiguring end of all people and all creation, not just a platitude to sing about or an unimportant side product of a guilt-ridden religion. We live into that transfiguring, glorious truth one particular person and place at a time.

One particular Mount Sinai, one particular glory place, is the International Community School in East Atlanta. Half of the children are Georgian natives, that is the U.S state not the country of Georgia. And the other half are refugee children from every war-torn country and place of conflict one can think of. Others have been exposed to gang violence, fear for their lives, injustice.

On a bright, warm winter afternoon, two lines of children are playing red rover in the bare-earth playground. The winter sun lights every little face with the glowing beauty of dark, and dusky, and pale, and every shade on earth, for the children are from thirty-plus countries. They are giggling in every language you can imagine, and it is clear

they understood each other. Every one is jumping up and down and laughing as they play a game of red rover.

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The Bosnian teacher, a former refugee, grins and says again and again, “WONNE, DOOO, TREEEE,” and one child and then another races toward the other line of kids who are cheering, clapping, and calling him in until he joins them, whooping and dancing, and now somehow, a part of the other line.

It’s hard to figure out the point of the game, since the standard version is all about standing with your arms locked keeping the “other” out of your territory. But here on this tiny campus for 350 children, a dream for children of *otherness* has come true. In the dream of the International Community School, over and over, the other is let in and everybody from everywhere wins.

Barbara Thompson, one of the people behind the transfigured red rover game, is a founder of the International Community School. It was not her life plan to found a school for refugee kids, but it becomes obvious that she had moments when the glory came glimmering, and she followed. She started out as a freelance writer. For years she did articles or books for people or businesses about some subject that they wanted to spread around.

She went through her days, writing well, being a good citizen and friend, living a fairly useful and responsible life, an orderly writer's life. But every once in a while she would say to herself, "You know, I have this funny feeling. I think my life is smaller than I am."

And somehow she got stuck on the story about what happens to kids in war, in Uganda or maybe Nicaragua. And that relentless and sickening old story just kept coming back; the brutality of family displacement; the maiming and killing of children in national and international power plays. The story just would not go away; it stayed in her head and troubled her at night and she would question, "Why is the world like this? What possible reason could be right enough to have as a collateral the killing of children and the destruction of families and communities?"

In the '90s she went to Bosnia while the war was still raging, chasing this same story of children of war. Then she came to Georgia to interview Bosnian refugee children and teenagers for a national magazine article. She was working on a tight deadline and had given her phone number to the kids she interviewed in case they thought of anything else they wanted to say. Sure enough, she was busy writing when the phone rang. On the other end was a young girl's troubled, soft voice, twisting around unfamiliar English words. She asked Barbara, "Could you come meet my family?"

Barbara said, “Well, you see, I’m working on this very important article, the one about children of war. And so I’m very busy. I’m really very, very busy right now.” There was a pause. An intense quietness. And somehow there was a moment. And a glory light glimmered. And Barbara knew to look up from her article and arise and follow the girl’s invitation.

She went to a dark little apartment, which some understaffed refugee resettlement organization had found for the family and then just left them there: little food, one light, no table, no chairs, no bed, no extra clothes, the adults with no English. Just a totally lost and demoralized Bosnian family: a grandmamma, and a mama, and a daddy, and their little child, and two teens, all of them sitting on the bare floor, since there was no place else to sit.

Barbara sat there with them on the floor, even though she was on deadline for that important article on children of war. And they talked haltingly, they smiled together, and something began to glow. She saw whatever it is we see in people that makes them real, and deep, and beautiful, and worth troubling over. I believe that we see the glory of the face of Christ in them.

Barbara made some calls on her cell phone. Gifts started coming from her friends and her church, gifts of furniture, and food, and

light, and love, and friendship for the strangers, for the aliens. We have seen the glory of this gifting in our own congregation. It happens through everyone of us here. We could name several such glowing moments in our own church. That is probably the best and most important reason for coming together as a community in Christ.

From that one evening, Barbara and her gang helped refugee family, after family, after family, get on their feet, find jobs and even buy homes in a land, where almost all of us came from some place that wasn't safe for us or where we weren't particularly wanted or needed.

The years went by, and Barbara handed off the refugee resettlement ministry, though she kept the friends. And she went back to a simple, orderly writer's life. But every once in a while she had that little nagging thought again, "I think my life is smaller than I am."

And one night she went to Columbia Seminary to hear Walter Brueggemann, a well-known theologian and author. As the class was getting ready to start, there was one seat left in an auditorium of 120 seats, and it was next to her. A man sat down, and they listened to Dr. Brueggemann's lecture.

They spoke a little bit at the break. She found out that the man was

the principal of a well-known private school. When the break ended, they went back to listening to the lecture, and when the lecture was over, the man went to head out one door, and she headed toward another exit. And he turned around in the doorway and looked back at her, and she looked at him, and there was this glimmering moment.

What hidden possibilities of glory did they see to make these words tumble out? Barbara said, “By the way, if you are ever interested in starting a school for refugee children let me know.” And Bill Moon, standing backlit in an exit doorway on his way out, said, “For twenty-five years I’ve been wanting to start a school for refugee children.” And they looked at each other in the glow of the light of Christ. And their lives were transfigured in a dazzling moment of the eternal Yes.

And they did start a school: the International Community School. Kindergarten through sixth grade, an amazing place, with teachers from public schools and private schools and college volunteers, and adult refugees, classroom assistants who had dodged bombs and buried their dead all over the world in years gone by. Barbara, along with her chance companion, joined by a nun, and then by many others, brought their histories together along with their anguish for the children of the world, and a new thing sprang forth.

They knew that their love for children everywhere has to find its incarnation in some particular place with some particular children. And a miracle for refugee children and their families happened in Decatur, Georgia. And today we see just such a miracle taking place here in Canada for the many families and orphans who have been subjected to wars and conflicts - in Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan and other places in Africa and South America. Many have escaped gang violence, fear for their lives, loss of homes and family members, and injustice.

And that's the way glory works. In a God-given moment that you didn't expect and couldn't have planned, your life opens up and up, and out and out, and you find yourself following the glimmering of some holy light to a glorious place you never knew – where you can give your gifts and receive the holy gifts of others, by the Love of God, through the Grace of Christ, in the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

You never know. There are these moments glowing with glorious possibility, of transfiguring power for each of us, if we will just notice. We never know when. We never know where. For though it is true, the glory of the Lord is everywhere, human beings need to see it somewhere in somebody in particular.

And when we do see the glory of the Lord gleaming in somebody,

then everybody else we see has glorious possibilities as well.

**Amen.**



## PRAYERS FOR TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY FEBRUARY 19, 2023

It is a strange time of year, O God. We linger between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. We are between the joy of your appearing and the horror of your undoing at the hands of those who would not or could not embrace your way of life.

Perhaps we like Peter, James, and John, wait for your appearing in dazzling light and unmistakable clarity: We are in need of a glimpse of Jesus who is the way through the mix and mess of this life.

Our planet is fragile and so is the life that claims it as home. We wonder how long we can simply take what we want with little regard for what it costs your creation.

We wonder if the planet is crying out for relief in the floods that are really tears; the earthquakes that try and shake our consciousness; the gales that blow sighs, too deep for words.

Renew and restore a vision of care for your creation. Remind us to take what we need and no more. Encourage us in a counter-cultural faithfulness that is not about consumerism. Spur us with new insight and deeper understanding that we may live mindfully each day, conscious of the impact of we do and fail to do.

We pray for the people of the world who bear the weight of earth's pain: those working in refugee camps trying to ease the pain of homeless, those supplying food and medical aid to war ravaged people, especially the people of Ukraine, Haiti, and Sudan. We pray for those who respond to floods, devastating fires, avalanches, and earthquakes, especially the rescue workers in Turkiye and Syria.

We pray for those who are ill, undergoing treatment and therapy, those who are lonely, battling any addictions, the homeless and hungry in our communities. We are grateful for doctors and nurses, caregivers and community workers who give so much to care for your beloved people.

We are in need of a glimpse of Jesus who is the truth – the truth that love is stronger than hate; peace is possible; and life can emerge even in the midst of devastation. We pray for that truth to be known.

We are in need of a glimpse of Jesus who is the life; inviting us to follow in his footsteps as he trod the way of love and justice, inviting us to follow him in prayer as he lived out his faith and made You known.

We give thanks for the good news that unfolds in the world as people dream your dreams, follow your nudging, and seek you in the faces they meet each day. Perhaps, God, it is the only Transfiguration we really need.

For all those who are quiet witness to your love and way of life, we give thanks, God. Draw us to the rhythm of Lent as it unfolds in our midst; a sacred invitation to explore the corners of our soul. Open us to your light that we might see ourselves clearly, with all our fears and faults and faith, with all our desires and dreams and duties.

Help us to see our journey as a place of your appearing, that like Peter, James, and John, we may come down from the mountain and set one foot in front of the other. We ask all these things in the name of Christ Jesus.

**Amen**