

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 15, 2026

The Last Sunday After The Epiphany
(Quinquagesima)

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on

Matthew 17:1-9

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The Shape of God

You might, like me, have wondered what God *really* looks like. We know he is invisible (Colossians 1:15) and yet he met Moses ‘face to face’ (**Exodus 33:11**), appeared to Elijah in the murmur of a gentle breeze (**1 Kings 19:11–13**), and promises that in the life to come we too shall see him face to face (**1 Corinthians 13:12**).

Christian spiritual tradition has often interpreted the scene of the Transfiguration as a special manifestation of God’s real look. The idea is that Jesus spent the whole of his life on earth hiding his divine look because this would have blinded us. If we take Matthew’s description literally, “his face shone like the sun”, we understand how this would have made any interaction between Jesus and his disciples impossible. So, this version goes, Jesus thought that at least to some selected disciples and for a fleeting moment he would show what being God really looks like by this extraordinary display.

I have never been convinced by this version for a variety of reasons.

The obvious one is that God does not look like the sun. He can choose to make himself manifest in a variety of ways (through fire, a cloud, wind) but the core belief of Judaism and Christianity has always been that God is *none* of these physical manifestations, because God is beyond any created form of representation.

There is an exception though. God cannot be seen through any created form of representation *except one*. There is one shape that displays what God really looks like. When God took this shape, interacting with it meant seeing God, touching God, and being touched by him:

“That which was from the beginning [that is God], we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we looked upon and have touched with our hands [...] [God] was made manifest, and we have seen him, and testify to him and proclaim to you that you too can have *fellowship* with God.” (Cf. 1 John 1:1-3)

The shape through which God can *really* be seen is Jesus. Not the Jesus of the Transfiguration though! With that Jesus fellowship would have been exceedingly difficult, to say the least: imagine walking, eating, sleeping, hugging someone who shines like the sun! Instead, John in the passage of his first letter I have just quoted, is talking about the very human-looking Jesus he lived with, night and day, for several

years – the Jesus who ate, laughed, and cried with him – the Jesus whom he saw betrayed, arrested, and bleeding on the cross.

There is a confirmation of this in the very passage of the Transfiguration: that vision put a distance between Jesus and the disciples, and they were afraid of him. Peter could think only of one way of dealing with this ‘shape’ of God: build a tent for him, that is put this frightening looking divinity in a box – a perennial temptation in the history of our dealings with God.

I find the following sequence in this scene very moving: at one point there remains only the Jesus they have known since the beginning, who significantly *touches* them, and tells them not to be afraid. There was no need to build a tent to contain God. That tent existed already, it was Jesus’ ‘flesh’, to use the vocabulary of John’s Gospel. In his homily few weeks ago Fr Carl reminded us that in John Gospel the Greek word for the Incarnation is *eskenosen*, that is literally “God planted his *tent* among us” (John 1:14).

This being the case, you might be right in wondering what the point of this scene is. Why this “shape-shifting” on Jesus’ part – I am trying to translate “transfiguration” in a way that makes us see the word anew. If Jesus’ real ‘shape’ was the one the disciples had seen from the beginning, what is the reason for this extravagant display?

Allow me to push my unconventional reading of the scene a bit further. I would like to think that this was more a *manifestation of what God is not* – a lesson that John understood very well when in his first letter he refers to the shape he touched as the real one. Let us admit for a moment that the extravagant shape of the Transfiguration was the real one: the consequence would be that all the people who met the ‘normal’ Jesus saw only a ‘dimmed down’ version of God. But there was nothing ‘dimmed down’ about the love of God that Jesus showed to all those he met, nothing ‘dimmed down’ about his preaching, his humility, his obedience. Jesus declared it unequivocally: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9)

Paul confirms this in his letter to the Philippians when he says that this love, this obedience, and this humility, this form of a servant, was the real ‘shape of God’ (cf. Philippians 2:6-10).

Having said this, we can make a step further and wonder what God looks like for us now, under what ‘shape’ we meet him now. In this very passage we find a pointer towards an even more profound ‘transfiguration’, ‘shape-shifting’ on God’s part. I see it in the closing sentence:

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (Matthew 17:9)

So far I have maintained that God’s real shape was the very human Jesus the disciples walked, ate, and lived with during the years of his ministry. This is true but incomplete. In that shape Jesus had to live in a confined space, Galilee, at a certain time in history, two thousands years ago, and could touch only a very limited number of people, in the hundreds, maybe the thousands – but that was all. That shape had to undergo yet another transformation, another transfiguration, for God to be really all in all, for all times.

This final shape-shifting was to happen in two phases.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus takes the bread and the wine, and says: “From now on this is my body and my blood, this is the *shape* through which you will recognize me, dwell in me and I in you – because *the ultimate shape of my Body includes you*”.

Peter wanted to build a tent for Jesus to ‘contain’ him, possibly control access to him. God instead makes a tent in Jesus that becomes big enough to include all of us, make all of us one Body with him.

I mentioned two phases in this ultimate shape-shifting of Jesus’ body and obviously its completion happens with the Resurrection – and here we find a confirmation of how provisional the dazzling shape of the Transfiguration scene really was. The face of the Risen Jesus does not shine like the sun. On the contrary, he appears in the human form the disciples have always known – they can touch him, eat with him, converse with him – with the added advantage though that with this body Jesus can be in all places and all times.

The shape of this ubiquitous presence though brings us back to the bread and the wine: Jesus is present, makes us one with his body, introduces us in his tent, *through the breaking of the bread*.

Please, feel entirely free to disagree with my interpretation of the Transfiguration. I know well how respectable is the spiritual tradition that sees in the dazzling garments and the sun-like shining of Jesus’ face a real manifestation of God. Even if this was the case though, this is definitely *not* the shape in which we meet God now.

The Transfiguration happens every Sunday. God meets us in the breaking of the bread, invites us in his tent through communion – and there you have the ultimate shape of God: you and me, our community, the love we have, or try to have for one another, and for every person God sends on our way.
