

TRANSFIGURES YOU AND ME

II Corinthians 4:4-6

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Transfiguration of the Lord, February 22, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

In the Presbyterian hymnals published in 1933 and 1955, a certain hymn was not included. In the hymnal published in 1972, this hymn made an appearance, but like Punxsutawney Phil having seen its shadow, disappeared into the ground once again and was not included in the hymnal published in 1990, our current blue hymnal. The official title of the hymn is *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. It is more commonly known as *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

Like all hymns, this one has a history.¹

In November of 1861, Julia Ward Howe, an active leader in the anti-slavery movement and a strong supporter of the Union during the Civil War, stood along the banks of the Potomac with Reverend James Clarke and reviewed marching troops, as they sang “John Brown’s Body” to a tune that had been written six years earlier, called “Canaan’s Happy Shore.”

While the words were not about the slave revolt led by John Brown, but rather about a Scotsman who served in the 12th Massachusetts Regiment, the tune led the fires of abolitionism to burn even more hot and bright within Howe. Reverend Clarke suggested she write new words to go with the tune, and Howe obliged.

I went to bed that night [at the Willard Hotel] [she later wrote]...and slept...quite soundly. I awoke in the gray of the morning twilight; and as I lay waiting for the dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to entwine themselves in my mind. Having thought out all the stanzas, I said to myself, “I must get up and write these verses down, lest I fall asleep again and forget them.” So with a sudden effort, I spring out of bed, and found in the dimness an old stump of a pen which I remembered to have used the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper.

Three months later, in February 1862, the five stanzas she wrote were published on the cover of *The Atlantic Monthly*. She later added a sixth verse.

Since then the *Battle Hymn* has made its way into American consciousness through such varied sources as

- John Steinbeck’s novels
- Peter Wilhousky’s arrangement of the hymn
- memorial services for Winston Churchill, Robert Kennedy, Presidents Reagan and Ford, and Judy Garland
- services commemorating the events of 9/11
- and the final sermon of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered in Memphis the night before his assassination.

**

The fifth stanza – which accompanists often play at a slower, more poignant pace – reads:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free;
While God is marching on.

¹ From <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/b/h/bhymnotr.htm> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_Hymn_of_the_Republic.

While the third line of this stanza is sometimes changed to read “As He died to make *us* holy, let us *live* to make *us* free,” the essential spirit of the stanza remains the same, namely:

There is “a glory” within the “bosom” – the being – of Jesus Christ

- “that transfigures you and me”
- that inspires us to change our hearts and minds over something as fundamental as how we view and treat people of another race
- that leads us to live – and can even lead us to die – “to make [others] free.”

There is a glory in Christ’s being that changes us, that transfigures us, that makes us different, that leads us to join him in making a difference in the world.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage
where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning
of his terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

**

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. It is a day when churches of Europe and America focus on a mysterious vision that Peter, James and John had on a mountain in which they saw Jesus transformed before their very eyes and the historic figures of their faith – Moses and Elijah – appear with him.² The experience was so dramatic – even ecstatic – that Peter’s first instinct was to enshrine the moment by building three booths in which they could all remain on the mountain forever. But Jesus refocused this instinct, instead sending Peter, James, and John back down the mountain to the realities of the world to join Christ in the “many dangers, toils, and snares”³ he faced on his march to the cross. “His truth is marching on.”⁴

When clergy preach this story on this Sunday each year, we usually focus on the transfiguration as a vision of the resurrected Jesus disciples are given *ahead of time* so that they might have the strength and courage to survive the crucifixion Christ will soon endure. If we have a glorious vision of the future, we can survive the present, say many transfiguration sermons.

But in the brief passage we read earlier from Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle alludes to a different, perhaps deeper, understanding of the transfiguration. Paul writes:

It is [the] God who said [at creation], “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Paul goes all the way back to the Creation Story: “When God said.... ‘Let there be light.’”⁵ Paul asserts that the light of God’s divine creation shines in us, changes us, transfigures us so that we may join God’s marching in the world. “Transfigures you and me.”

**

When we have before us a story like Transfiguration, a text like Paul’s reflection on it, and a piece of music like *The Battle Hymn*, it becomes easy to point to places in history where men and women have been transfigured by the light of Jesus Christ and joined him in making enormous changes in human history.

² Mark 9:2-13, Matthew 17:1-13, Luke 9:28-36.

³ John Newton, *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound* (1779).

⁴ Thanks to the paper on this passage from II Corinthians by Karen Sapio at The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminary, January 2009, for connecting this phrase in *The Battle Hymn* with Transfiguration Sunday.

⁵ Genesis 1:3.

- It is the light of Jesus Christ that led Christians in this country to come to realize that, in the words of Lincoln born 200 years ago, we could not “dare... ask a just God's assistance in wringing [our] bread from the sweat of other men's [and women's and children's] faces.”⁶
- It is the light of Jesus Christ that led Christians in the early decades of the last century to realize we could not call ourselves democratic while denying women the right to vote.
- It is the light of Jesus Christ that led people – some in this room – to realize that “separate but equal” meant “separate but unequal” and to lead black and white to live together, study together, work together, play together, and even worship together.

It is easier to point to transfigurations that have occurred in history than it is to seek them out, or even simply recognize them in the present. It is easier to celebrate light that has been shining for a generation or two than it is to know where such light will shine next. Fresh light is often hot light, and, when it shines on us, it can be unwelcome light. But nonetheless, we are compelled to ask: Where might the light of Christ be shining ... right now?

The Battle Hymn of the Republic reinforces that the light of Christ is surely shining in those big social movements of freedom and justice with which God marches through the world

- Freeing slaves
- Ending tyranny
- Stopping genocide
- Lifting people from the depths of poverty and subsistence
- Rescuing children from sexual slavery and prostitution, people of color and immigrants and homosexuals from ravishes of prejudice, discrimination and hate crimes.

These are easier to see.

But there may be other ways the light of Christ is shining, or seeking to shine, through you and me as well.

Maybe, just maybe, this financial crisis we are in is a historic moment in which God is shining the light of Christ on our collective relationship with – for lack of a better term – our money.

I graduated from seminary in 1980. By today's standards, there have been, I believe, two relatively minor recessions since I graduated. Almost without exception the past twenty-five to thirty years has brought unparalleled prosperity in our country and several others. Think about the quality of life we have all enjoyed the last three decades:

- Improvements in the safety and comfort of automobiles and the design and quality of our homes
- The choices we have in food – the way it is grown and prepared and served – and in the clothes we wear
- The communication we enjoy from email to cell phones to blackberries to iPods to Facebook and Twitter
- The surgeries that used to confine us to home for several weeks and now are done in a few hours outpatient

In addition, there are huge portions of the world population – particularly India and China – that have seen millions of people lifted out of poverty.

But now....we are worldwide in a down time.

My question – and my hope – is this:

- In the darkness of this time, can we be transfigured by the light of Christ in such a way that we take the good all our prosperity has produced, yet transfigure it to where we are not quite as enamored of it and defined by it as we have been, and where we become more willing to spread it around so that it benefits more and more of the human race?
- Can we have a transfigured relationship with our money so that we emerge from this crisis with a world more humane for more of the population?

⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

I don't know what the specifics would look like. But as a nation – and even across nations – I think it means some basic things – like feeding people, clothing people, providing people some hope and means of supporting themselves, of having access to the terrific medical care available – and maybe in the process relieving a little tension in the world that leads so many of them take up arms. I think a transfiguration could and would and probably should look something like that.

It has in many ways been a great run for our nation, since World War II, and since the early 1980s. But the light of Christ is probably leading us to something as inspirational and hopeful and truthful and new as what Julia Ward Howe saw, watching troops pass by on the Potomac. My prayer is that we, too, will be awakened in the middle of the night with words that we just have to scrawl “in the dimness with an old stump of a pen... almost without looking at the paper.”

“God’s truth is marching on,”
and it is a truth
“that transfigures you and me.”

Transfigured by the light of Jesus Christ,
Will we join God in his march
Through the world?