

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Wednesday, August 06, 2025**  
The Transfiguration of Our Lord

**Solemn Eucharist**  
5:30 pm

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Mark Brown, *Honorary Assistant*  
on

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

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## Transfiguration or Disfiguration?

Today is the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6, 1945—and it's the feast of the Transfiguration. A sober reminder that life has its transfigurations—and its disfigurations. And often the choice is up to us.

Three of the gospels tell the story of the Transfiguration of Christ on the mountain; II Peter mentions it. His face was changed—his clothes became dazzling bright. A vision of Christ in glory, along with Moses and Elijah—representing the Law and the Prophets.

In the original Greek this event is called the μεταμορφώσεις, meaning a change of form or appearance. From which we get the English word metamorphosis. We tend to steer that word toward butterflies and rocks and prefer the more elegant Latinate *transfiguration* when speaking of Christ in glory.

The disciples saw him transfigured before them. And, as he was changed, so shall we be in that realm we call eternity. *...we will be like him because we will see him as he is...* [1 John 3;2].

But transfiguration is not confined to heaven. Christ is all and in all—and all things hold together in him. [Col. 3:11, 1:17] So, even earth has its transfigurations. And we could say that our assignment, our calling, our joint project as human beings in God's world is nothing less than the transfiguration of our humanity, of our human community. The Bible ends with a vision of this new city, this new community—this kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Sometimes I wonder why they went up the mountain to pray. The traditional site of the Transfiguration is Mt Tabor in the southern Galilee region. If you asked a 5-year-old to draw a picture of a hill, that's pretty much what it looks like: a bowl upside-down. Most visitors take a shuttle to the top. You can hike it—but it's a hike! It takes some real effort to get up there. So, why did they go up the mountain?

Maybe it was for the view! It's a spectacular 360-degree view. If I were facing east the Carmel Range would be back over my right shoulder. The Jezreel Valley is below at my right; in the distance looking southeast are the hills of the occupied West Bank of Palestine. Looking east are the mountains of Jordan—across the river.

Moving toward the north in the near distance are the hills of the Galilee region—you can't quite see the Sea of Galilee for the hills, but it's there. In the northeast on a clear day you can see Mt Hermon, snow-

capped in winter and the highest peak in the region.

Altogether a spectacular view and one that lifts the spirits. Enjoying natural beauty on that scale changes us; taking in the splendor of God's creation changes us—transforms us. We could say transfigures us inwardly. And we could say the same thing about the beauty we create ourselves: music, for example, has power to transfigure us inwardly. We come here to be changed.

But, just as this life has its transfigurations, so life has its disfigurations. Jesus reveals what is most transfiguring: love. Especially love in action. His example was washing their feet. Love in action transfigures our lives. Cruelty disfigures our humanity. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was disfiguring. As was the fascism and cruelty of the Axis powers that brought on the war.

Jesus teaches the way of transfiguration. The “how to” is summarized in the great double commandment: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. These two commandments summarize all the Law and Prophets, he says. In Matthew 25 we learn more of the specifics of love of God and neighbor—transfiguration vs disfiguration.

It comes in a vision of the Last Judgment. The nations are summoned before the throne to be judged. To some he says:

*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these ..., you did it to me.*

Then he says to the others, *just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'*

Our humanity is transfigured by the good that we do: feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the incarcerated and ill. When we do so, we care for Christ himself. If we fail or refuse to serve Christ in the vulnerable and deprive the poor of food and proper medical care, we desecrate the image of God in our neighbor. And when we are cruel to the strangers in our midst and deprive them of justice, we are disfigured—our own cruelty and injustice disfigures our humanity.

I wonder. If the Almighty were to decide that enough was enough and the trumpet sounded and the nations of the earth were summoned before the throne: would we, would America be judged great among the nations?

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