

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

February 11, 2024

*Annual Parish Meeting & Transfiguration, Mark 9:2-9*

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.<sup>1</sup> *Amen.*

I welcome you to a growing congregation – where, thanks be to God, we enter a third consecutive year of increasing human and Holy Spirit energy, joy, and love! And as this momentum reaches our 2024 Annual Parish Meeting, we come upon the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration begins with Peter, James, and John, joining Jesus on a mountain climb, separate from their friends and followers.<sup>2</sup> “And [Jesus] was transfigured before them,” Mark writes, “and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.”<sup>3</sup> This event resembles Moses’ descent from Mount Sinai, when “carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hand,” *his* “face shone because he had been talking with God.”<sup>4</sup> Underlining this connection, Moses suddenly appears on the mountaintop.<sup>5</sup>

Peter then says to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here,” and he suggests that he, James, and John, “make three dwellings,” tabernacles for Jesus, for Moses, and for Elijah.<sup>6</sup> Before Jesus responds, the Gospel notes the disciples’ fear: “[Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”<sup>7</sup> In the midst of this fright, a cloud overcomes the scene, and a voice speaks.

In Jesus’ baptism in Mark, a voice from heaven speaks *directly to Jesus*, saying, “*You* are my son, the Beloved.”<sup>8</sup> In this Transfiguration scene, however, the voice speaks for the disciples’ benefit, saying, “*This* is my son, the Beloved.” Ensuring neither they nor we miss the intended reassurance, the voice adds an emphatic, “Listen to him!”<sup>9</sup> The cloud suddenly clears, and Mark concludes the scene: “As they were coming down the mountain, [Jesus] ordered [the disciples] to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”<sup>10</sup>

The Transfiguration pivots Mark’s Gospel, as the journey toward Jerusalem now begins. To this point, the Gospel’s action has primarily concerned Jesus’ ascendancy, focusing on accounts of his cohering a community and the terrific deeds of power he has performed among them. Appreciating that in the Gospel’s cosmology Jesus’ ascent “up [the] high mountain” with the three disciples brings them literally closer to God’s heaven, from this moment, forward, the focus of the Gospel shifts to *descent*, down the mountain and into the world’s shadow, down to Jerusalem and toward the cross.<sup>11</sup>

Where on this mount of Transfiguration are we, Trinity Church?

Though Trinity has experienced seasons of ascendancy: the 1870s, the 1950s, the 1990s, to name a few in this building; and though we have enjoyed brushes of traction: 2004, 2014, and 2019, stand out most recently; we have been losing ground for most of twenty years. Outside our walls, a culture increasingly suspicious of Christianity has made our path difficult, pushing against us with distrust and, even worse, with disinterest, dismissal. Within our New England setting of mainline denominations' atrophy, we at Trinity have excused *our* decline as inevitable, and we have doubted growth as possible. By the madness of our disappointments, we have even borrowed the culture's suspicion and aimed it at thriving parishes in other places, in other parts of the country, telling a story of their growth as a compromise of principle, while reassuring one another that our withering has signaled righteousness.

Within our walls, we – even with best intentions – have often made matters worse. We have affirmed the heroic efforts of a few parishioners, rather than investing in sustainable systems that protected against bitterness and burnout. We have nurtured cultic affinities to individual staff members, rather than modeling commitment to our entire congregation. We have focused favor on our preferred priorities, rather than seeking the wellbeing of the whole parish. And, siloing this way, the energy of our congregation moved over time from cooperation to competition – competition for resources we treated as scarce. In this competitive environment, we stopped forbearing one another as we should, and, living with less and less Grace, we celebrated our vocations as critics, rather than contributors. We built community with complaint and commiseration instead of hope and faith.

Lord, have mercy: all that sounds like Ash Wednesday! Let's get to Easter.

To picture the great difficulty of renewing our congregational culture at the intersection of all these forces, I have used the image of pushing a boulder *up* a hill. However, fit into the Transfiguration scene, these discouragements send us barreling *downhill* – away from God's brightness and aspirations, into the shadow of Calvary, with dwindling hope for Resurrection. I dare that rehearsal for two reasons: to remind us that those habits and that history remain *close*, at eager ready to return to their former effect; and I dare the catalogue to make unequivocally clear what an astounding accomplishment you have achieved by overcoming their power.

See, momentum *matters*, and – as Super Bowl fans will feel from their sofas as soon as this evening – momentum builds in either one direction or the other. In this way, **a shrinking church shrinks, and a growing church grows.**

You will hear shortly about some of our growth metrics, and, in a “believe-it-to-see-it” spirit, I want to highlight our attendance, specifically – I do not want you to miss or underestimate it. Though Trinity's Average Sunday Attendance (or “ASA”) has historically benefited from big events and the presence of tourists, when I measure our congregational health, I prefer to look at our Program Year, those meat-and-potatoes Sundays from September through May – and not just at their average, but our year-over-year, week-after-week performance. From that perspective, realize that our mid-morning Sunday attendance in '22-'23 was greater than every Sunday in the

year before, save only one [track with me: second Sunday in September, second Sunday in September ... Reign of Christ, Reign of Christ ... Baptism of Jesus, Baptism of Jesus ... every Sunday, larger than the year before, save only one].

Now in this, the '23-'24 Program Year, our mid-morning attendance was greater than *all those* growing Sundays last year, save just three. That's only four Program-year Sundays in nearly two years when our attendance was not better than the same weekend the year before – and, between special events and snowstorms, we can even make account of those few exceptions.<sup>12</sup> Trinity Church, I hope you will celebrate this remarkable consistency and our steady *growth*.

In the thick of all this, our momentum remains new and fragile, and we ... can ... not ... let ... up! Thanks be to God, to keep our growing momentum our 2024 Stewardship supports the call of a fourth full-time priest, the first time since my arrival that we will have the benefit of Trinity's customary clergy complement. [And that's worth a round of applause, friends!]

While prioritize the person before the position, I expect this new colleague will serve as our “Priest for Outreach.” In 2019, our Outreach ministries endured *four transitions in seven months* – for those who will remember former colleagues by name: outreach responsibility shifted from Rainey Dankel, to Rita Powell, to Katie Day, to no dedicated staff member – all between March and November of that year ... and then? Well, you know, a global pandemic. Trinity moved from a long season of having at least two full-time staff positions focused on Outreach, to having *none* for the last *four* years. Even as I acknowledge the disappointments we have felt during this season, I am also proud that we did the best we could with what we had in the unprecedented circumstances we found ourselves. And I am thrilled about where we are heading next.

I like to name that the Lord does the calling, and that we do the hiring. By that principle, I hope the Lord will get on the horn soon, so that this new priest can start before June. On that schedule, they can add a little new-car smell to summer, have a season to learn our Outreach topography, and enjoy the opportunity to build relationships – all before our excited and expanded team kicks off another growing fall together.

I am excited, too, about the development of our Ministry Council. The Ministry Council empowers parishioners, with the support of the staff, to shape our ministries, rather than the other way around; hear that again: the Ministry Council empowers parishioners, with the support of the staff, to shape our ministries, *rather than the other way around*. The Ministry Council operationalizes our values and testifies to the enduring truth that the most important resources for congregational growth – God's Love and God's Grace – are never scarce, because (as you may have heard during this Program Year) there is “abundantly more” of all that than we can either ask or imagine. Look forward to a long-awaited “I'm interested in ministry at Trinity Church” event in early fall.

So what can you do, can I do, can *we* do – today, next week, and the Sunday after that – to keep this growing congregation growing? Well, go with Jesus ... generally, that's a good place to start

at least most of the time. Let us go with Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John. See, for us to sustain this momentum, we must dare a high mountain *apart* – apart from decades of drag and the trend of our denominational peers. And, no matter our theology of the “Messianic Secret” (in the concluding verse of today’s Gospel appointment) we must *tell this glad story of Trinity’s growth*, appreciating that to become evangelists of the Gospel, we must become evangelists of Trinity’s good news ... and the news is good!

To realize Transfiguration – never for ourselves only, always for the sake of the world – we now must encourage the encouragers; welcome the welcoming; and excite the excited. And, with constancy and care, we will keep this growing church growing: growing in playfulness and in curiosity, in joy and in service, in exploration and in formation, in faithfulness and in love, love, love. All this we seek as companions in the household of God.

*Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> From Psalm 31.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:2a.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:2b-3.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:29.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 9:4.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 9:5.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 9:6.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 1:11.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 9:7.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 9:9.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 9:2.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Ward’s last Sunday in 2022 was larger than the same week in ’23; our *outdoor* Saint Francis Day program was especially successful in 2021 after the worst of the pandemic; our welcome of the Ukrainian community before the Peace March as the war began in 2022 drew crowd we did not match on the same Sunday in ’23; and we had a snowstorm predicted (and somewhat realized) for Baptism of Jesus in 2024.