This is Transfiguration Sunday, and our text is Matthew’s version of that mysterious scene.

I had some struggle preparing this sermon, because I am a little out of practice. Besides, I have preached the Transfiguration many times to this congregation, so the pressure was on me to come up with something new.

I remember the story about David Dietz, the former science editor of the Scripps Howard Press, speaking to the exclusive Cleveland Club. His announced topic was, “Adventuring Through The Universe.” The time for the speech came. He was introduced by the president of the Cleveland Club, who, as a part of his introduction, reviewed all the speakers who had addressed the club over the years. He got to 1943, stopped, and said, “Oh my, our speaker in 1943 was David Dietz, and his topic then also was, ‘Adventuring Through The Universe.’” Dietz got up to speak, and said, “It’s the same old speech, but it is also the same old universe.”

This morning it is the same old text, and it may turn out to be the same old sermon, but I hope not.

The story comes near the end of Jesus’ life. The three years of teaching were concluded a few days earlier at a place called Caesarea Philippi. There he asked his disciples, as sort of a final exam on three years of teaching, “Who do you say that I am?” They all equivocated in answering, except Peter, who boldly spoke, “You are the Christ!” Which is the right answer, but in the next breath he demonstrated that he didn’t understand what it meant to call Jesus the “Christ.” And Jesus rebuked him. It was not a happy ending to their meeting.

Our text for this morning begins, “After six days…” That is, six days after that scene at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus took the leaders of the disciples, Peter, James, and John, to the top of a mountain. There, before their eyes, he is transfigured. His face shone like the sun, and his clothing became dazzling white. Then a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son. Listen to him.”

Now that is an epiphany, a grand and glorious one. It is to be read each year on the last Sunday of the season called “Epiphany.” At the beginning of the season, the second Sunday, the church reads the story of Jesus’ baptism, which is another epiphany, where God also says, “This is my Son.” So the season begins and ends with God speaking from heaven in epiphanies, affirming that this man, Jesus, is His Son.

There are intriguing details in the story begging interpretation: the appearance of Elijah and Moses, Peter’s offer to build booths, the significance of being on a mountain, the predominance of light. But I don’t want to talk about that this morning. I want to say something about epiphanies, why we don’t expect them in our lives, and why maybe we should.
They were common in previous ages, and even are today in some cultures, cultures we designate, with a degree of arrogance, as “primitive.” We assume the way we see the world is qualitatively better than the way they do. We see the world as “merely natural,” as “dead matter,” and so able to be manipulated, pushed around, for our use. They see the world as “sacred,” infused with the holy, to be approached with reverence.

The difference was explained by Mircea Eliade in a landmark book entitled *The Sacred And The Profane*. He said we in the modern world divide the world between the sacred and the profane. Previous cultures did not do that. The whole world was sacred to them. God was an immediate presence, and they felt at one with nature and the universe.

Eliade said this division of the world between sacred and profane happened at the time of the Enlightenment, 400 years ago, when reason became king, and we no longer looked to God to explain things in the world. So over the last centuries, in western civilization, that which was considered sacred space has steadily receded, and the profane, or secular, like an irreversible tide, has grown triumphantly to claim nearly all of life.

Most people, including church people, are really secularists, even if they say they are religious. They are secularists because they no longer see God in the world, or even look for God there. As one of the early scientists of the Enlightenment said, referring to God intervening in the world, “We have no need of that hypothesis.” Which meant we can explain everything without reference to God. That is what the secular means.

The sacred, in our society, if it exists, has retreated to private life, especially to private inner life. So when someone has an epiphany, a revelation, we don’t know what to do with it. Actually, we do know what to do with it. We turn them over to the psychologists, who explain it as a psychological, neurological, chemical, or even an intestinal phenomenon, without reference to God.

That is why I was reluctant to reveal that I experienced an epiphany of sorts many years ago. I was afraid to say anything about it for fear of what people might think. But I’m retired now. I don’t give a hoot what they think.

I was in college, working the summer in the mountains on a camp staff. I was struggling that summer with finding a vocation. I was being pulled toward the ministry, but resisting it mightily, for reasons that were important at that point in my life. I had been thinking and praying about what I should do with my life. One night, as I sat outside looking at the stars, I saw a light in the trees across the meadow. I turned away, thinking my eyes were playing tricks on me. I looked back. It was still there. It remained there for maybe twenty seconds, then disappeared.

It was a wonderful experience. It left me with a sense of assurance and confidence, out of which I drew courage to make the decision of what I would do with my life. It was an epiphany, I am sure of it, because of what happened subsequently in my life. But I never told anyone, because I feared they might think I was suffering from delusions.

Like the woman who was washing the dishes in the kitchen sink and had a vision that we are all one. It was accompanied with a liberating sense of well being. She ran into the living room, shouting to her family, “We are all one. We are all one.” She kept that up for several days, until her family took her to a doctor. He listened to her story, reviewed her behavior, and committed her to a hospital.

There she continued to say, “We are all one.” They would examine her periodically, asking, “How do you feel?” She would say, “I feel wonderful. I have never felt better in my life. And, we are all one.” At each time of review of her case she would say the same thing, “I feel wonderful, and we are all one.”

Finally she caught on. She was never going to get out of there as long as she told the truth. So the next time they interviewed her, they asked, “How are you feeling?” She said, “I feel lousy. And the world is going to hell.” They said, “You’re cured. You can go home now.” She said later, “I still believe we are all one. I just don’t tell anyone.”

You see, in a secular world, God is no longer needed to explain things. We have no need of that hypothesis. But epiphanies still happen. Perhaps you have had one, and have never told anyone.

They can happen in what are called “sacred spaces, little islands of the holy in the vast secular sea in which we live. They have also been called “thin places,” a wonderful metaphor, implying that God is beneath the surface of things. Thin spaces
are those transparent places where the holy can be experienced.

Churches ought to be sacred spaces. That comes as news to some. Churches ought to be designed, and liturgy ordered, and congregations prepared to encounter the holy. Emily Dickinson wrote, “Build a house that tries to be haunted.” That is the way all churches ought to be built, as sacred spaces.

Eliade blamed the Protestant movement for eliminating the holy from the churches. The Protestant movement emerged with the Enlightenment in the intellectual ferment of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. The emphasis was on the mind, what reason could grasp.

Religion in time bowed to reason, and Protestant churches started emphasizing doctrines, saying, you’ve got to believe this or that doctrine or dogma in order to be saved. God was no longer to be found in the world, or the sacraments, through your senses, but in a creed through your mind. God was reduced to a formula called “The Trinity.” Someone said of the Trinity, you will go to hell if you don’t believe it, and you will go crazy if you try to understand it.

It is also why so many Protestant churches were architecturally plain, bereft of mystery. Reason had no place for mystery. So in those fiercely Protestant churches, such as those founded by America’s forebears in New England, there was no decoration at all. No stained glass, no statues, no color, just doctrine preached for a couple of hours.

In a “show and tell” in a second grade, three children were asked to share something of their religious heritage, including some symbol of their faith. The first said, “My name is Joshua. I am Jewish. I go to the Temple Beth Shalom. And this is a Star of David.”

The second said, “My name is Maureen. I am Catholic. I go to St. Mary’s. And this is a Crucifix.”

The third said, “My name is Fred. I am a Methodist. I go to First Church. And this is a casserole.”

There is something missing in Protestant churches where the social hall is more important than the sanctuary. Something is missing when the sanctuary looks like a social hall.

But not here. This is a beautiful church, designed to evoke a sense of the holy, a sacred space. And what happens up here in the chancel, the music, the liturgy, the preaching, is better than any other place I know. You seek to be serious here about the business of worship. This is a house that tries to be haunted. And those who come here with expectations of serious worship, have on occasion, encountered epiphanies. Churches should be sacred spaces.

Nature is also a sacred space for many. I first noticed that several years ago in the nature writings of Loren Eiseley, and Annie Dillard, both of whom had enormous followings.

Eiseley, a professional paleontologist, wrote, “The world is not devoid of miracles, the world itself is a miracle we’ve gotten used to.” In his autobiography, he wrote, “I who profess no religion, find the whole of my life a religious pilgrimage.”

And Annie Dillard, whose book *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek* became a classic in nature writing, wrote of an epiphany she experienced living alone in a cabin in the woods. She wrote, “One day I was walking down Tinker Creek, thinking of nothing at all, and I saw the tree with the lights on it.” (I can’t tell you how relieved I was to read that she saw a tree with lights on it too.) She wrote, “It was less like seeing, than like for the first time being seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of the fire abated, but I am still spending the power.”

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Nature is a thin place where the holy can be experienced.

But more surprisingly in this secular world, I have found a yearning, a longing, for epiphany. You can see it in secular literature and film. Secular literature is filled with the longing for epiphany. There is even a technical term for it in literary studies. It is called an “epiphanic moment.” It is when there is a moment in the story, maybe a flash of light, or a disorienting experience, when things fall into place and make sense, and the hero or heroine gains a sense of purpose in his or her life, a meaning that was absent before. Or maybe a vision, that makes manifest the deepest of human longings,
the yearning for harmony and unity and reconciliation and peace.

That kind of epiphany was most explicit in a film years ago entitled, Close Encounters of the Third Kind. A space ship visits earth to the accompaniment of beautiful music, and dazzling light, like the sun. Then creatures from another planet descend in nearly blinding light. It was an epiphany. And they are not the monsters we fear, but innocent, loving, beings, affirming our hope that the universe is one, and friendly.

And The Shawshank Redemption, a more recent film, written by, of all people, Stephen King. The movie takes place in a prison, which in some philosophies is a metaphor for human life. The hero is a man named Andy Dufresne, who liberates the prisoners spiritually, and gives them hope with the example of his life and suffering.

In one of the most moving scenes I have witnessed in film, Andy plays the exquisitely beautiful duet from Mozart’s “The Marriage of Figaro” through the prison intercom. The song is the duet between the Countess and Susanna, called “the echo duet.” It transforms the prisoners, who stand transfixed as if they had seen a vision. It transported them out of their captivity into a world of freedom, out of their world of ugliness into a realm of beauty, and out of the violence that was a daily reality, into an experience of harmony. It is an experience of transcendent beauty, a kind of epiphany that can open you to dimensions of the creation you did not know before.

Epiphanies happen. (I want to put that on a bumper sticker.) Epiphanies happen because the world is holy. The secular world has cast a pall over the sacred, but the holy slips out, overflows, and undermines the secular with epiphanies, glimpses of the sacred. “For those with eyes to see,” the world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Now back to the text. It is not likely you will have an epiphany like Peter’s, but this story is here to indicate when an epiphany might happen. It can happen any time and any place, but this story points to a time when it commonly happens. You can call it a “boundary experience.”

Jesus transfigured. His face shining like the sun. His clothing white as snow. Beside him in the vision are Moses and Elijah. The disciples have fallen on their faces, because that is what you do in the Bible when you are in the presence of God. And God says, “This is my son. Listen to him.”

“Listen to him.” That is what they heard. That was the epiphany. It was significant because they didn’t want to listen to him. They didn’t like what they heard at Caesarea Philippi. At Caesarea Philippi, he said, “I’m going to Jerusalem to a cross, and if you are my disciples, you will take up your cross and follow me.”

They hadn’t counted on that. Jerusalem was the enemy’s headquarters. As long as they had been up in Galilee, miles from Jerusalem, they were safe. Not only safe, but celebrated. They were celebrities in Galilee. It was like summer time, and the livin’ was easy.

But to go to Jerusalem was to cross a boundary and enter another world. And that is precisely where epiphanies are likely to happen, when you are called, as the disciples were, to go where you would not choose to go, do what you feel impotent to do, be who you are afraid to be.

Or when you face that final boundary on our lives, death itself. That, I am convinced, is why there are commonly epiphanies in the last days of one’s life, and, as you may know, they are often the vision of light.

At the boundaries of life is where we are most likely to meet God, because that is where the pall of the world is most thin, and unguarded by the sentinel of reason. We approach that boundary with all our faculties, not just our minds. Which means it is there that we are most like those who have gone before us, for thousands of years, who were emboldened, encouraged, and ennobled, by epiphanies.

Dag Hammarskjold’s diary was discovered after he was killed in that fatal crash in Africa. People were amazed that this quiet, gentle, ambassador for peace, produced one of the most beautiful spiritual journals in the modern world. He wrote:

God does not die on the day we cease to believe...
but we die on the day when our lives cease to be
illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily,
of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.