

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It happened on March 18th, 1958, in downtown Louisville, Kentucky at the busy intersection of Fourth and Walnut. At the time, Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk living in a monastery. He had chosen a life of silence, enclosure, prayer and separation from the world. Though he was a well-known spiritual writer, he lived largely apart from city life. He came into Louisville on an errand, and standing on a street corner surrounded by shoppers and office workers, he suddenly had what he later described as a profound awakening. He looked at the ordinary people around him, strangers passing by, and was suddenly overwhelmed by a realization. Instead of random strangers, he saw clear as day individuals radiating the presence of God.

And he later wrote in one of his most famous books, "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. There are no words for it. And if only I could have told them." Merton said that suddenly he saw that he loved all of those people, they were his own, that there was no real separation between him and them. He described it as waking up from a dream.

Before this realization, Merton had sometimes written about life in the monastery as a refuge from the world, a way of being separated to do the spiritual work of contemplation. But after this wild experience on Fourth and Walnut, he didn't see it that way anymore. Holiness didn't mean a distance from the world, but an engagement with it. His writing became substantially more outward-focused, and he started communicating with moral leaders like Martin Luther King, and he became a public voice that has lasted for generations.

In 1974, almost 20 years later, Jaime Escalante, a teacher, was assigned to teach math at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. He quickly learned that the administration there had low expectations for their students, which matched the expectations that students had for themselves, many of them already caught up in gangs or headed that way. In his first few days, Escalante was so disheartened by

the lack of preparedness of his students that he called for his former employer and asked for his old job back. The school is in danger of losing their accreditation, and one administrator told him, "Well, there's really no teaching. There's no learning going on here. We're really just babysitters." And that moment turned him around.

Unwilling to accept that response as the status quo, Escalante found nine students who were willing to take algebra, convincing them that they could indeed learn math, and that that skill could get them a job in engineering. He told students, "Learn it and you can go to college." One of the students reflected that if he wanted to teach us that bad, I think we can learn. And another shared that it wasn't just that he was a great teacher, but that he believed that his students could do it. Escalante was frequently in trouble for coming in too early, staying too late, working weekends, having too high of standards. 15 years after he was hired, the high school had 570 students taking AP exams, many of them going on to attend USC. Sometimes all it takes is the briefest of moments to see things clearly, to change everything.

Merton didn't suddenly make these people on the street corners radiant. They already were. He just woke up to it. He just saw them for what they truly were. Escalante didn't suddenly make these students capable of taking an AP calculus exam. He just woke up to the fact that they weren't what everyone had said about them. He saw them for who they truly were. And some 2,000 years ago, Peter, James, John, and this guy named Jesus they've been falling around, go up to a mountain to pray. And up until now, at least in Matthew's version of the story, they don't really know who Jesus is. They have seen miracles. They've heard the radical teachings, but still, they continually ask, "What sort of man is this?"

That changes up on the mountain during the transfiguration. When Jesus is transfigured up there, his full divinity is made known, and for this ever so brief, a moment they see clearly. They see the glory of the Lord, the awe, the splendor, the radiance. They get a glimpse. On the mountain

nothing new is added to Jesus's identity. He's who he's always been, but the veil simply lifts and they have eyes to behold. They saw him for who he truly was.

Epiphany means revelation. It means something was true all along, and suddenly for no particular reason that we can predict and for no reason that we can really understand, we get to witness it clear as day, the story beneath the story, the reality that's beyond this reality, the truth that encompasses all truth: Thomas Merton, Jaime Escalante, the mountaintop, the empty tomb, the font, all revelations.

On a street corner in Louisville, a monk woke up and saw strangers shining. In a struggling classroom in East Los Angeles a teacher woke up and saw future engineers. On a mountain three disciples woke up and saw pure glory. In the resurrection the disciples at the tomb woke up and saw that love is stronger than death. And today at this baptismal font, we wake up again. We look at baby Aurelia, not as a future project, but as someone who is already claimed, already radiant, already held in Christ.

In baptism nothing is magically physically changed about a child. We're not making them God's beloved. We are announcing that they already are, and we promise to see her and each other that way for the rest of our lives. And so, this morning we take heart again, that though we walk through the world blindly most days, sometimes we are lucky enough to see these moments of perfect clarity: the story that's beneath the story, the reality that's beyond reality, the truth that encompasses all truth. And if we're brave enough to behold them, they have the power to make this old world knew. What Merton said is true, there is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun. But today, for baby Aurelia, we will try.

Amen.