In 1958, at the height of the Cold War, a young Texan, 23 year old Harvey Van Cliburn, won the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow. He became an overnight sensation. His win was viewed as an American triumph over the Soviet Union, and when he returned to New York, he was greeted with a ticker-tape parade in Lower Manhattan, the first American musician to be so honored, cheered by 100,000 people lining Broadway.

Interestingly, Russian people today continue to feel a deep respect and reverence for Van Cliburn. As world famous Russian pianist Olga Kern explains, “My parents loved Cliburn in 1958, and played his recordings at home. I grew up on it, and absolutely loved it. I loved how he transformed that music to a different level. He opened for Russian musicians how this Russian music can sound completely different: more melodic, softer, more dramatic. It sounded so new and so fresh. It was incredible.”

Today, the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition is one of the most celebrated competitions in the world. It takes place every four years. In advance of the competition, an esteemed screening jury travels around the world to hear pianists perform before live audiences. From these auditions, 30 of the world’s finest pianists are invited to compete for the coveted Cliburn medals and awards.

Cliburn President Jacques Marquis says: “We look for a true artist who can connect with audiences and touch their hearts. We give the competitors multiple platforms to present us with their artistic personality and communicative power.” Pamela Mia Paul explains what she and her fellow judges look for: “There are certain people who are just going to jump out at you,” she says, “people that you just remember.”

These judges, listening to the finest and most excellent young pianists of the world, wait to hear something that is new and fresh breaking through the performer, as it once did through Van Cliburn in 1958. These judges listen for a kind a breakthrough moment in the performance when something seems to come from beyond the performer, an extra dimension or quality, something new, something transcendent, that grabs their hearts and souls.
This kind of breakthrough moment to something deeper, something more beautiful and transcendent is what happened to John, James and Peter on the day that Jesus took them up on the mountaintop on the day of his transfiguration. They came in touch with something beyond their understanding of life and of themselves, something that was fresh and new, something transcendent shining through Jesus that started shining in their own hearts and souls.

Jesus took them to a different level, to “higher ground” where they rose above their ordinary consciousness and were transported, not artistically as when one listens to an amazing piano performance, but were transported spiritually in the deepest sense. The three disciples were awakened by a rare moment of excellence and revelation in which the beauty and grace and power of Jesus’ spirit burst forth with unprecedented Light. The spirit of God suddenly shone through Jesus, and the disciples had eyes to see Jesus for who he essentially was. They also saw, though not at first, something transcendent about themselves.

The scripture records, “He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” The disciples saw Jesus’ true and full nature shining forth for the first time. And they not only saw who Jesus was, but they caught a glimpse as well of their own hidden potential and of where their spiritual journey with Jesus was going to take them. Today Jesus wants to lead you to that higher ground, to that mountaintop where your eyes are fully opened to who he is and to who you are, where you yourself will be transfigured and transformed.

The scripture goes on to say, “Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” This last phrase “Listen to him” is important. God is calling us not to waste this precious opportunity of knowing Jesus and learning from him. God is saying to us, “This is my Son. He is worth your attention! So take the time to listen to him and do everything he tells you. He will lead you to higher ground, into the heart of my kingdom.”

Now it is interesting to reflect on Peter’s anxious reaction to all of this. When he sees Moses and Elijah standing in the light with the transfigured Jesus, Peter doesn’t know what to do, he doesn’t know how to take this all in. He blurts out in a kind of knee-jerk reaction, “Lord, It is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make three dwellings here; one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Any devout Jew at this time would have been in awe of Moses who received God’s law on Mt. Sinai, and would have been equally in awe of Elijah who represented the whole tradition of the Hebrew prophets who clarified God’s message to the wayward Jewish people. Peter is suggesting that he build three “dwellings” or “memorials,” for these three spiritual giants.

Now let’s think about this for a moment. If you build a memorial for someone, generally that is done for someone who is dead, who was considered great, and who people have put up on a pedestal. In a way Peter was distancing himself from the living spirit of Jesus. Peter was putting Jesus up on a pedestal like an historical figure, instead of entering into a
life-changing relationship with him. We all are in danger of doing this, and then missing the whole point of the journey.

Have you built in your mind a memorial to Jesus and then relegated him to the museum of the far distant past? Do you sometimes avoid thinking about who Jesus really is so you won’t have to take his teachings too seriously? Do you sometimes avoid deeply listening to him, because if you did, you would have to change your behaviors, and your views, and your life? Or do you instead let yourself enter into a living relationship with Christ where you are flooded by his Light and teaching, and are transfigured yourself at his side?

Jesus leads us, as he did John and James and Peter, up to “higher ground,” up to the mountaintop where we also will be transfigured by God’s pure light. Are we ready for that? Are we ready to listen to this One who is glowing with the Spirit, and wants us to glow with the Spirit as well?

There is a Chinese parable about a potter who was ordered to produce some great work for the emperor. He tried long and hard to make it, but in vain. Nothing worked. After repeated efforts, no work of exceptional art or beauty was produced. One day, after putting his latest work into the oven to fire it and seeing that once again he had failed, he, out of despair, threw himself into the furnace and incinerated himself. It was that act of self-sacrifice that changed the porcelain piece in the fire, and it came out the most beautiful piece of porcelain ever known.

When Christians rise to a higher ground with Christ, when they let the self disappear and totally give themselves to the work of love and to their work for God, as that potter did for his porcelain ware, these Christians then produce a rare and glorious light that heals and unites the people around them. We Christians are changed from the inside out when we give ourselves to God’s love and God’s work in this way, and we glow with the Spirit as Jesus did on the day of his transfiguration.

So we cannot consider ourselves to be authentic Christians, if we are not being transformed by the Light of God’s Spirit. We are not real Christians if our thoughts and views and behaviors are not changing every day into God’s more graceful and compassionate ways. If we are not growing into more loving, forgiving, tolerant and open-hearted persons, then that is a sure fire sign that we have lost our connection with Jesus.

Because you cannot be connected to Jesus and not undergo wholesale and constant transformation every day! There is no end to this humble process of transformation, and if it stops at any time, it means we have gone dead inside. That is why Jesus said to the elderly statesman Nicodemus, “Unless you are born again, unless you are transformed at the very deepest level of your being, you will not enter the kingdom of God.”

Is this what is happening to you? Do you feel yourself slowly moving out of and letting go of the feelings and behaviors of irritation, judgment, anger, and selfishness? Do you feel yourself changing more and more into a person of grace, and generosity, and kindness? Do you feel yourself more and more expressing the deep all-embracing Love of God to your neighbors, to those who you previously judged or felt superior to, to those who are
hurting or misunderstood? This is why we come to church every week - to be changed, to be transfigured, to be transformed. And if this is NOT happening to us every Sunday morning, then we are missing the point of coming to church and seeking Christ.

To rise to higher ground with Jesus and reach a point in which we glow inside with the God’s spirit rather than expressing our own immaturity or selfishness requires that we die to ourselves, that we bluntly look at all our own choices, thoughts, views and feelings, and see what we need to let go of. This is hard work. It is hard to change, it is hard to be this open, this humble, and this honest with God. Most of us from time to time will find ourselves avoiding or resisting or excusing ourselves from this transfiguration process that Jesus has started within us. We find ourselves running down the mountain, rather than going up the mountain, so that we can get away from whatever Jesus is trying to do with us, whatever Jesus is trying to change within us.

So we need to be patient – patient with ourselves, and patient with others. We need to recognize that hiking up to the mountaintop with Jesus exacts a cost. Don’t be confused by those who choose to remain at the base of mountain and feel that they have no need of changing. They don’t know about transfiguration, and they don’t care yet about going up the mountain. But you do care. So stay on track, and continue to head up the mountain to your breakthrough into the Light. Be excited that there is something deep and wonderful buried within you about to be revealed, a Light that is within Jesus and light that is also within you that longs to shine.

Your face was meant to shine like Jesus’, shine with joy, shine with compassion, shine with a kindness and peace that comes NOT from this uneasy and sometimes nasty world, but comes from God’s eternal world. Is your face shining in this way? It will, if you walk with Christ.

What kind of breakthrough is Christ leading you to have today? How is Christ calling you to rise to higher ground this week in your relationships, in your choices, in your behaviors, in your attitudes, in your walk with other people who have different life experiences than you? How is Christ preparing us here at Emmanuel to have a breakthrough moment as a church, as we seek to celebrate diversity and extravagant welcome as Christ once did?

Let Jesus lead you up to the mountaintop. Let him take you to a different level and show you how he wants you to be transfigured. Let him show you the deep beauty and grace that resides within you that Christ wants you to express. He will teach all of us how to be transfigured, and to shine, as Paul says, like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life.