SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — February 15, 2026

The Key Great Awakenings in America:

- **First Great Awakening** (c. 1730s–1740s): This movement challenged established religious authority, emphasizing personal conversion over formality. Led by figures such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, it divided churches into "Old Lights" and "New Lights," fostering the growth of Baptist and Methodist denominations. It is often credited with helping to unite the colonies through a shared experience.
- **Second Great Awakening** (c. 1790s–1840s): A massive revival that began in the frontier, particularly Kentucky and Tennessee, spreading nationwide. It was defined by intense camp meetings led by figures like Charles Finney and fueled social movements such as abolitionism and temperance.
- **Third Great Awakening** (1850s–1900s): Characterized by the 1857-58 revival in major cities, this period focused on social gospel, missionary work, and reforms aimed at addressing the effects of industrialization.
- **Fourth Great Awakening** ??? Some historians argue that the Civil Rights movement was a fourth Awakening. Others question it. Can an Awakening really happen, given how secularized we have become? What would it be like? What happens in a vacuum of spirituality? Capitalism as religion? Power as religion?

Impact on America

- **Democratization of Religion**: The movements broke down traditional, formal church hierarchies and encouraged personal, emotional faith, leading to a rise in evangelicalism.
- **Social Reform**: The revivals fueled efforts for women's rights, the abolition of slavery, and education reform.
- **Religious Diversity**: The proliferation of new denominations, such as Baptists and Methodists, increased religious pluralism in the country.
- **Cultural Identity**: They helped build a shared sense of identity across the American colonies, laying groundwork for revolutionary thinking.

How is an experience like the Transfiguration story in today's Gospel the beginning of a Great Awakening?

Diana Butler Bass has been a guide for me in navigating the changes, the transfiguring, of my faith. She's no available in the Substack online community. She's a church historian who knows the Great Awakenings well. In her "Sunday Musings" yesterday, she related the story of preaching at Jonathan Edwards' church on Transfiguration Sunday. She sets straight the difference of Edwards' most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" — a quintessential 'fire and brimstone' sermon. But it wasn't the sermon that started the First Great Awakening; it was seven years later when a frustrated Edwards railed against what he saw as a waning movement. He began the Awakening with sermons on the theme of needing the light of God's Spirit to illumine our souls in order for us to see the beauty of everything around us.

We are in need of a Fourth Great Awakening in our country, are we not? But we have become so secularized, how could a spiritual awakening possible happen? Some say the Civil Rights movement was the start of a Fourth Great Awakening?

But I believe that the jury is still out on that one unless we arrive at the transfiguration of the face of our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable ones, as the beginning of a spiritual awakening based on our common humanity. Isn't this what Jesus ultimately came to do by taking the place of the least of God's family on the cross?

Last week, we noted how Mahatma Gandhi began a movement by listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Isn't this what our Gospel is trying to say to us? We need to especially listen to Jesus when it comes to nonviolent resistance to nationalistic violence that seeks to rule over our neighbors.

One of my favorite stories, a story about an old Rabbi who once asked his pupils: how can you tell when the night has ended and the day begun? "Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the Rabbi. Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No," answered the Rabbi. "Then what is it?" the pupils demanded. "It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

Isn't this the best of what we saw in the Civil Rights movement? Isn't this the best of what we saw in Minneapolis over the past month? Isn't having the face of our neighbor transfigured by the glory of God's image, the image in which we're created, how we have an Awakening?