

TRANSFIGURED LIVES!

(02/27/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 34:27-35
Mark 8:27-38, 9:1-10

“Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” (Mark 9:7)

Today, the seventh and last Sunday after Epiphany, is also called Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration Sunday is a transition day in the seasons of our church year. It is a bridge over which we can walk as we move from the season of Epiphany to the season of Lent.

When I think of the event of the Transfiguration, I think of one of my shining moments (no pun intended). Approximately sixteen years ago, following Kristen’s graduation from Assumption College, Darlene, Kristen, and I embarked upon a guided tour of Italy. We had spent a month driving all over Italy as a family the year I studied in Switzerland, but Kristen was only four at the time and wanted to see it as an adult. On the tour, as we passed through a small town in northern Italy (I forget which one), our tour bus stopped at a beautiful little stone church.

Inside the church, there was a magnificent depiction of the transfiguration, possibly a copy of Raphael’s well-known painting, along the back wall of the chancel. Our guide on the tour, who knew that I was a Protestant minister, had no idea what the scene on the wall depicted. In response to questions from some of the people on the tour, he tried to bluff while I bowed my head, kept my eyes closed, and slowly shook my head back and forth. Finally, he gave up and asked me if I could help him. So, I explained to our tour group who all the people in the painting were and what it was all about. Our guide was grateful to me for bailing him out, for helping him turn the stop into an educational experience for everyone, and the people on the tour with us thought I was really smart!

By the way, my second shining moment on that trip came at the ruins in Pompeii, not far from Naples. If you recall, the town of Pompeii was destroyed when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 C.E. Pompeii wasn’t covered by molten lava from the volcano, which would have destroyed everything; it was buried in so much ash that its residents basically suffocated and none of the buildings was damaged.

Our guide held up a bottle of good Italian wine and said that he would give this bottle of wine to whoever could tell him what famous rock group had held a concert at Pompeii. I was the only member of the tour who knew that the group was Pink Floyd! Our tour guide was really impressed—especially since I was a minister (though I am not sure what that has to do with it—the Floyd is hardly a Satanic group). Of course, he didn’t know that I listen to the Floyd every

single day of the year, or at least every single day that I step into my car, and that the first four cd's in my car stereo are *Wish You Were Here*, *The Wall (2)*, and *Animals*. In my defense, *Animals* contains an excerpt from the 23rd psalm. In any event, I count that as the day that I really won the respect of my fellow tourists! Sort of a legend in my own mind!

But that's not the point. What is the point I was trying to make? Oh yes, it was about a different kind of shining moment—the shining moment of the transfiguration. Forgive me for taking a brief walk down memory lane!

For some reason, the transfiguration has never been emphasized in our religious tradition. Unless you are Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, or attend an Eastern Orthodox church, most people, especially most mainline Christians, don't know much about it. From my time with my grandson, Miles, I have learned from Elmo and Abby on Sesame Street that when we do not know something, we should “look it up!” So, to learn more about this event in the life of Jesus and his three closest disciples, I decided to take Elmo and Abby's advice and look up the word *transfiguration* in Harper's *Bible Dictionary*. Here I discovered that the transfiguration is “the title given to an event in Jesus' life in which he was transfigured.” That certainly clarifies things!

A transfiguration is basically a transformation. The Greek word for “transfigured” (which I confess I do not know) is also the root of the word “metamorphosis.” The scriptural account of the transfiguration describes a transformation of Jesus, a radical change. It was probably also a transformative moment and experience for the three disciples who accompanied him to the top of the mountain.

The transfiguration is one of the few events in Jesus' life that contain a chronological reference; it indicates the number of days that have passed since the last recorded event in that gospel. It is connected in both time and meaning to Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, followed by Peter's disagreement with Jesus about whether Jesus' crucifixion is a good idea, followed by Jesus' slap-down of Peter. This is the reason why I included the scripture passages about Jesus and Peter's interaction in today's lesson. The transfiguration, which could be seen as an amplification of Peter's dialogue with Jesus, makes these passages of scripture a wonderful lead-in to Lent, which begins this coming Wednesday.

The divine voice that the disciples hear is a confirmation of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, and it stands as a rebuke of Peter for equating Jesus with Moses and Elijah. The voice from heaven tells Peter that the three are not on the same level! The words, “Listen to him” speak to Peter's outspoken reluctance to accept Jesus' prediction of his death; they call

Peter to listen not to his own human concerns, which Jesus describes as the realm of Satan, but to Jesus' revelation of the saving acts of God.

The transfiguration is like a road sign, a sign that points both ways. It points all the way back to Jesus' baptism, when a voice from heaven declares that he is the Son of God. It also points forward. It points toward his crucifixion and resurrection.

The account of the transfiguration appears in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Though the accounts are similar, each is a little different from the others.

One of these differences, of special interest to us during Lent, has to do with the matter of prayer. As we just heard, Mark, the first gospel to be written, tells us,

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.

The account in Matthew is almost word-for-word the same as Mark. Luke, however, is a little different. Luke tells us,

Now about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

In addition to the discrepancy in the length of time that passed between Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection and the transfiguration (Mark says six days; Matthew and Luke say eight days), Luke tells us that Jesus took his three closest disciples "up on the mountain to pray."

Jesus and the disciples go up on the mountain to pray. Throughout Luke's gospel, we read that Jesus prays before or during significant events. At the time of Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21), we are told,

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In his account of how Jesus heals a man suffering from leprosy, Luke says,

But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray. (Luke 5:16)

In the sixth chapter of Luke, we are told that Jesus gathers his disciples. From the group he selects twelve to be his apostles, the ones he has chosen to travel with him and to whom he entrusts the mission of the gospel. Luke 6:12 tells us,

Now during those days, he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.

So, when we read the account of the transfiguration in Luke telling us that Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up on the mountain to pray, we know that something important is going to happen!

We could stop today's reflection on the scriptural passages that describe what happened preceding, during, and immediately following the transfiguration right here, and we would walk away with a piece of gold! At the crucial times of his life, Jesus goes off by himself to pray. Prayer is an integral part of the transfiguration. In fact, perhaps it is because Jesus reflects on the events of his life through the practice and discipline of prayer that they become transformative events.

How often when confronted with a problem, with a difficult decision, do we go off by ourselves to pray? If we don't try to see our lives and the burdens we carry from God's perspective, as Jesus did, we will be like Peter who views crucifixion from a human, from an egocentric perspective, as something to be avoided, not something to be embraced as the gateway to new life. If Jesus brought the significant or troubling moments of his life to God in prayer, why shouldn't we? Why don't we? It is partially to answer or at least address this question that we will explore the theme of prayer in our Lenten sermon series this year.

The transfiguration is what we might call a mountaintop experience. Jesus and his three closest disciples go up on a mountain to pray. There the disciples experience transcendence; they experience a deeper spiritual reality. They see Jesus accompanied by Moses, who symbolizes the law, and Elijah, who symbolizes the prophets, emphasizing the deep connection between the three. Jesus' face and his appearance change. His clothes become dazzling white.

Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus about his imminent "departure," which was to be accomplished at Jerusalem. The Greek word for departure (which, once again, I confess I do not know) can also be translated as *exodus*. Just as Moses led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, Jesus leads us, or at least those of us who follow him, through death, both our final death and the many "deaths" that we can experience, to new life.

Peter, understandably, wants to remain in the heavenly glow of this mountaintop experience. He suggests that they build three dwellings, tents, or booths on the top of the mountain--one for each of these great spiritual leaders. As Peter suggests this, a cloud comes and overshadows them. A voice from the cloud says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, the Chosen; listen to him!" Perhaps the voice is telling the disciples (and also us) that Jesus' message is not reducible to either the Law or the moral and religious admonitions and warnings of the prophets.

The vision fades. The disciples are left with Jesus. They slowly descend the mountain, trying to make sense of what they have just seen. Luke says, "And they [the disciples] kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

What happened in Jesus' transfiguration? I believe what the disciples witnessed was a breaking through of the divine dimension of Jesus' life into the human. Jesus refers to himself, and is described by those who encounter him, who *know* him, as "the Son of Man." He is human; he is flesh and blood. Jesus also refers to himself and is described by those who encounter him, who *know* him, as "the Son of God." He is the divine Logos, the creative Word of God, the eternal Christ. He is material; he is also spiritual. He is human; he is also divine. He is temporal; he is also eternal.

The transfiguration is a revelation of Jesus' divinity. I don't think it is for Jesus' benefit that this epiphany takes place; it is for the benefit of Peter, James, and John. In the transfiguration, the disciples experience both Jesus' humanity and his divinity. This is a transformative experience for them.

Perhaps, as incarnations of God's spirit, what is revealed to the world in the person of Jesus, in Jesus' transfiguration, is also true of us. Perhaps, like Jesus, we are both human and divine, both matter and spirit, both secular and sacred, both profane and holy, both temporal and eternal. When we realize that what we consider opposites are contained within us, as they were in Jesus, and when we realize this is true of our brothers and sisters, those who look like us and those who do not look like us or believe what we believe, we will truly have a transfiguration experience!

We long for a transfiguration experience, an experience of Christ in all his glory. We long for dramatic epiphanies like that which the apostles experienced on the mountain top. Sometimes this happens, but it doesn't always happen--in fact, it doesn't usually happen this way. Most of us experience the transforming power of Christ in ways that are quiet and subtle, like the whisper of a still, small voice within.

In the movie “Life as a House,” which came out some time ago, Sam is a rebellious teenage boy. The product of divorced parents, Sam finds his oppositional-defiant identity in blue hair, body piercings, and his use of illegal substances.

George, Sam’s father, who is unemployed, is trying to rebuild his life as well as his son’s life. George convinces Sam to assist him in building a house. As they work together on the house, through the evolving father-son relationship, Sam’s self-esteem and sense of identity become progressively stronger.

In one of their conversations, George talks to Sam about the process of change. He tells Sam,

Change can be so constant that you don’t even feel the difference until there is one. It can be so slow that you don’t know your life is better or worse until it is. Or it can just blow you away, making you something different in an instant.

Think of the moments or the process of significant change in your life, and I suspect you will agree with George.

An encounter with Jesus Christ has the power to blow you away, to change you in an instant! This sometimes happens to people who have a born-again experience, a conversion experience, an experience that turns their life around. But, as the psychologist of religion William James tells us in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, it doesn’t always happen this way, and *it doesn’t have to happen this way*. The change that is taking place within you may be so slow and constant, you don’t even realize it’s happening. If you fall into this category, what James calls the “once-born,” you may have experienced a time when, during prayer, you felt God take hold of your heart. You may have experienced a time when God entered one of your dark, lonely nights, filling your room or your soul with a mysterious comforting light. Who knows—God might also come to you in a dream!

God’s presence and power are not confined to mountaintop experiences, to what the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow called “peak experiences.” God is constantly present with us and within us. We hear God’s voice in the cry of a newborn baby and in prayers that are miraculously answered. We feel God’s touch in the gentle embrace of a friend. At various moments during worship, like John Wesley, we may find our hearts “strangely warmed.” Our Christmas hymns remind us of Emanuel, “God with us.”

It would be good for us to remember what Robert M. Pirsig, in his classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, said:

The Only Zen you find on the tops of mountains is the Zen you bring up there.

This echoes what Zen master Dogen has said:

If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?

By the way, I hid my copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* from my wife back in 1999 and again in 2001 as I made my case for why I *really had* to see and possibly do a kora around Mt. Kailas, the sacred mountain in the middle of the Tibetan plateau. If she had seen this quote and the quote from Dogen, she probably would have told me that that which I sought in mystical Tibet was already right within me! And she would be right—you don't need a mountain to have a mountaintop experience! Or, to be more precise, we could say that the "mountain" is within you!

In these transformative experiences, whether they are dramatic or subtle, we die to our old selves and are transfigured, are transformed into something new. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes,

So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

This can happen to us in worship. It can happen to us in prayer. It can happen to us as we share the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It can also happen to us in our daily life when we simply "chop wood or carry water."

The disciples have a religious experience, an experience of the transcendent, a powerful transformative experience on the mountaintop. They have what we would describe as an epiphany. Jesus then tells them not to tell anyone what they have seen until after he has been raised from the dead. Luke tells us,

And they kept silent, and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

What is our response to our religious experiences, our "mountaintop experiences," our epiphanies, whether they come as dramatic transformative experiences or as the subtle nudging of the Holy Spirit toward the changes we need to make in our lives? We can walk down the mountain and revert to our ordinary ways. Or we can shine! We can shine like Jesus, Moses, and Elijah! If we keep these experiences close to our heart, they will find expression in our daily lives. We will begin to shine like Moses did after his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. We will shine like Jesus did on the mountain. We will shine like the disciples probably shone. We can become not only receivers but also transmitters of God's inner light!

Transfiguration Sunday is a transitional time between the liturgical season of Epiphany and the season of Lent. Lent is a time of opening ourselves to Christ. It is a time to learn more about both his humanity and his divinity. It is a time to learn more about both our humanity and our divinity. It is a time to deepen our own spiritual journey.

When the disciples are on the mountaintop, they hear a voice. The voice from heaven tells them to listen to Jesus. This voice also speaks to us. It tells us to listen to Jesus as he speaks to us in scripture, but also as he speaks to us in prayer. If we listen to him, if we open our hearts to him, our epiphanies, whether dramatic or subtle, will transform us. As the apostle Paul says, we will die to the old self, our egocentric life, and be born into the new.

The transfiguration reminds me of the children's hymn: "This Little Light of Mine." The transfiguration raises the possibility that this inner light may be more than a metaphor. There may actually be a divine light, a spark of the Divine within us. When we let this light, the light of the risen Christ shine forth in us, it will shine forth not only through our faces but also through our lives!

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February 27, 2022*