

Listening to Jesus: A Transfiguration Story

Mark 9:2-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Let's get the following out of the way right from the start. This rather bizarre story, known as the Transfiguration of Jesus, is one that many progressive Christians categorize, to use an old Native American phrase when telling a story, **"I'm not sure whether this really happened, but I know that it's true."** Therefore, some of you may choose to see this story as a literal historical event, and others may choose to see it as a way for the gospel writer to make a crucial point, metaphorically, about his understanding of Jesus' identity and its effects on his disciples.

What does **transfiguration** mean, anyway? The dictionary defines it as a **change in form or appearance**. This term comes from the Greek word for metamorphosis. There tends to be an added emphasis on being an exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change. It also can mean seeing something in a whole new light – **the revelation of something not noticed or understood before**. That's why this story appears in the lectionary every year on the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany, you may recall, is about revealing the Presence of God in the person of Jesus. The story of the Transfiguration certainly fits into this category.

What's the overall purpose of this story? The description of Jesus' entire presence being bathed in dazzling brightness (again, whether literally or metaphorically) was used by the author to **express the interior shining of Jesus' Divinity breaking forth as pure light**.

Jesus goes up an unnamed mountain with Peter, James, and his brother John. Jesus is somehow transformed so that the appearance of his clothes shine, apparently supernaturally, amazingly white. Suddenly, standing next to Jesus and talking with him are Moses (the great Hebrew Lawgiver) and Elijah (the great Hebrew Prophet). This is meant to reveal how Jesus is indeed a continuation of these two great traditions in Israel's faith – the law and the prophets. The author intends his readers, his community of faith, to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, the one of whom the prophets spoke, the one who fulfills the law, the one who is from God and of God, and to whom they should listen.

Peter quickly offers to build three dwelling places for them. He is interrupted, however, when a cloud mysteriously comes and overshadows the terrified disciples. Echoing the same words heard at Jesus' baptism, a voice calls out from the cloud, "This

is my Son, the Beloved." Yet on this occasion a command is added: "listen to him!" More on this in a moment.

When the voice had spoken, Jesus is found to be alone. The three disciples are told to not share this experience with anyone. Regardless of the reason for not sharing this experience, it stands true to this very day that it's hard for anyone (at least us Presbyterians) to share a mystical spiritual experience with someone else. After all, we don't want anyone to think we've gone off the deep end. But that's unfortunate. **I think we should encourage each other to share our spiritual experiences. And our response is not to judge, but simply to listen and acknowledge the experience of another. That's one of the great lessons from feminist theologians. Listen!**

The story of the Transfiguration is indeed often used as one to talk about our own "mountaintop experiences." And as much as the three disciples, as well as ourselves, would like to hold on to them, they simply aren't meant to last. Peter exhibits this desire by offering to build three dwelling places so that they could stay in that moment. Who can blame him? If and when you or I have an unexplainable spiritual experience – the feeling we have connected with a Sacred Presence in our midst – we want the moment to last as long as it can. But alas, that's not the plan of life. **Jesus does not allow his disciples, and therefore us, to stay in safe spaces far above the chaos and needs of the world.** We are reminded that **mountaintop experiences**, what I used to call "God moments," **are all too quickly followed by "real life."** That's the routine, ordinary, day-to-day life that we experience back down in the "valley," or "in the trenches," where life is lived.

Suffering, in its myriad of forms, is real. The good news is that Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain to minister to those in need. The good news is that God dwells among us and within us – not 'up there' somewhere, as is often indicated in biblical stories themselves, like our Old Testament reading of the story of Moses receiving the law of God up on the mountain. There's not a world religion at any time in history that hasn't see a mountain as spiritual places where they encounter the divine. **If I've learned anything from Celtic spirituality, however, it is that any place – even in the valleys and trenches of life – can become a "thin place" where we encounter and experience God's Presence.**

There are indeed revelations, moments of transfiguration, in the commonplace. After all, if we believe that the whole earth is filled with God's glory, then it makes sense that it is possible to recognize that glory from time to time, including within ourselves. If we add a somewhat scientific and evolutionary perspective, we can then affirm that there is "divine meaning that shines through the world of atoms, particles, rocks, sunsets," trees, a rainbow, a drop of water, everything in creation – including each other, and hopefully in the life and ministry of the church. [Bruce Epperly, blog on patheos.com, 2-11-18.]

Many of us now believe that the energy of love itself permeates all things. Where have you encountered, where do you currently encounter, the glory of God? Blogger on patheos.com, Bruce Epperly, adds, "Only our vision prevents us from seeing the infinity of all things. **God's glory is veiled by our failure to look deeply into life settling for the surface rather than the inner life and light of all things.**" Epperly goes on with the following comment that may take a bit of pondering to fully understand.

Yet, the glory of God is also ethical in nature. Jesus Christ is our model of spiritual formation in his ability to mediate his divinity with the humanity of those around

him. Conversely, **we are called to mediate our humanity with the divinity in all things.**

"We are called to mediate our humanity with the divinity in all things." No, you won't find that particular theological perspective outlined quite like that in the Presbyterian *Book of Order* or *Book of Confessions*. Epperly adds something that also intrigues me. **"Our churches can be laboratories of mysticism, calling those who have encountered God to go out into the world, spreading the good news of God's loving companionship."**

I want to close with a return to the scriptural text. Interestingly, after the words, "This is my Son, the Beloved," comes the only recorded command in the New Testament that is spoken directly by God to humans. God adds, "Listen to him!" **These words, "Listen to him" direct us to the understanding that being a follower of Jesus means not only *doing* what Jesus does, we are to also *listen* to what Jesus says. So, what are some of Jesus' words that we are commanded to listen to? And by the way, the biblical author's intent is for us to recognize Jesus' words as God's words to us.** How about:

- Peace be with you
- do not be anxious,
- follow me
- let your light shine
- forgive others
- be merciful
- be reconciled to one another
- keep your word
- go the second mile
- love your enemies
- seek first the kingdom of God
- ask-seek-knock
- beware of false prophets
- be wise as serpents and harmless as doves
- repent
- do not be afraid
- let the little children come to me
- honor your parents
- judge not
- watch and pray
- love God, and your neighbor as yourself

How well do you and I really listen to Jesus? How well do we together as a community of faith? When we seek to live by these words, and when we experience the glory of God around and within us, **God calls us to be transfigured – to let the divinity within us shine forth. That's what it means to be created in the image of God.** And the season of Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday this week, is an excellent opportunity to listen and to be transformed.

Amen.