

Experiencing Jesus' Transfiguration – and Ours

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

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This amazing and bizarre story known as The Transfiguration of Jesus fits, for many of us, into the category: **"I'm not sure whether this really happened, but I know that it's true."** In other words, the important point isn't really whether the language should be taken literal or metaphorical, but rather what it meant to the gospel writer concerning his understanding of Jesus' identity, and what it can mean to us today.

Let's first look at what **transfiguration** means. The root of this word comes from the Greek from which we also get the word metamorphosis. The most common definition is: **a striking change in form or appearance, and usually into a more beautiful, exalted, and spiritual state.** Have you ever looked at someone and it appeared that they were almost glowing, or had an aura about them?

What, then, is 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 gospel writer to express the interior shining of Jesus' Divinity breaking forth as pure light.** What a beautiful and powerful image.

In this story, Jesus goes up an unnamed mountain with three of his disciples, Peter, James, and his brother John. Jesus is somehow transformed so that the appearance of his clothes shine an amazingly supernatural white. Suddenly, standing next to Jesus and talking with him are **Moses (the great Hebrew Lawgiver) and Elijah (the great Hebrew Prophet).** By the way, our Old Testament reading from Exodus relates the story of how the face of Moses shined brightly when he came from being in the Presence of God. The picture of the three of them standing together is meant to **reveal how Jesus is indeed a continuation of these two great traditions in Israel's faith – the law and the prophets,** which make up the majority of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. 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 has an interesting reaction and response. He quickly offers to build three dwelling places for them. We'll look at what that means in a moment. Peter 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, as well. When the voice finished speaking, Jesus is found to be alone and they all head back down the mountain.

The story of the Transfiguration is commonly used as one to talk about **our own "mountaintop experiences."** That has been my approach when preaching on this in past years. You may want to reflect, then, on your own spiritual experiences, perhaps a specific moment in time, perhaps at a particular place (like Dwight Mission or Ghost

Ranch), when you felt what you can only describe as being in the Presence of God. We, of course, are always in that Sacred Presence of the Divine that is beyond, among, and within us. Yet, sometimes we experienced that Presence more intensely at certain times and places than in others.

A common response is to want to make that experience last. But as reflected in this biblical story, as much as the three disciples, as well as we ourselves, would like to hold on to them, they simply aren't meant to last. In an effort to do so, however, Peter offers to build three dwelling places so that they could stay in that moment. His offer is both a recognition of the holy and an attempt to contain it. Who can blame him? But alas, **spiritual experiences are something we do not have the power to contain.** **Therefore, though still etched in our memory, we, like the disciples, have to head back down the mountain.**

Metaphorically, it is not on the mountaintop, but rather down in the valley, the level places, where life is lived and the needs of the world press upon us. Therefore, crucial to a fuller interpretation of this Transfiguration story is what immediately follows. When they all come down the mountain, they immediately encounter a person who asks for a healing miracle for his daughter. After a profound mountaintop experience, which the disciples wish to hold on to, they go right back down to the valley and find themselves in a situation where ministry is needed. We are reminded that **mountaintop experiences, what I like to call "God moments," are all too quickly followed by real life.**

Now, there's not a religion – at any time or place in history – that hasn't perceived mountains as spiritual places where the divine can be encountered. **If we have learned anything from Celtic Christian 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, epiphanies, and moments of transfiguration in the commonplace, even in the routine ordinariness of our daily lives. 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, both around and within ourselves. So I ask: **Where have you, or do you 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 reflection to fully understand. He writes:

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.

Think about what that implies, **"We are called to mediate our humanity with the divinity in all things."** 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." As Presbyterians, whether it's the need for more courage, or the right words that don't impose our beliefs on others, **perhaps we need to step out a little further in our efforts to share good news**

with others. How can we, all of us as individuals and as a community of faith, more effectively **let others know a place like College Hill exists and that they are welcome?** Let's continue to reflect upon that, and then take action.

I want to return, now, to our biblical text to make one additional important point. Interestingly, **after the words, "This is my Son, the Beloved"** (we've talked about how we believe God also calls each of us the beloved), **comes the only recorded command in the New Testament that is spoken directly by God to humans. God adds, in reference to Jesus, "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, and perhaps first of all, to *listen* to what Jesus says. It is in the listening that directs our attitudes and actions, thus leading to an experience of our own transformation, perhaps our own transfiguration.

What are some of Jesus' words that we are commanded to listen to? Let us pause for a moment and **take time to really listen to these words:**

- 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 anxious
- 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
- love one another

How well do you and I *really* listen to Jesus? How well do we do that together as a community of faith? When we seek to live by these words of Jesus, and when we experience the glory of God around and within us, **God calls us to be transfigured – to let the divinity within us, within you, shine forth.** That's what it means to be created in the image of God. Therefore, **let us also seek to see the divinity in others shine forth.**

As we enter into season of Lent, a time of serious reflection, beginning with Ash Wednesday in a few days, it is an excellent opportunity to listen and to be transformed, perhaps even transfigured.

Amen.