

When Life Is Transfigured

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2 Peter 1:16-21 NIV

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Mark 8:34—9:8 NIV

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

And he said to them, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

During Epiphany we've been considering some of those first events in which we see the manifestation, or revealing, of the glory of God in the story of Jesus: the visit of the Magi to the Christ child in Bethlehem, Jesus' visit to the Temple when he was twelve, his baptism by John in the Jordan, and his first miracle at Cana of Galilee. Today we skip ahead to that mysterious and pivotal event called the transfiguration.

The transfiguration is a turning point in the Gospel story. It comes just after Jesus tells his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). And then, right afterward, we read in Luke's Gospel that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51), knowing that his path would lead him to Calvary. The transfiguration is a turning point in the disciples' understanding of Jesus' mission. Perhaps, beforehand, they thought the leaders of their people might receive Jesus' message of the kingdom of God. After the transfiguration it was another story, for it became clear that the way of Jesus was the way of the cross, and they could follow him only at great cost and sacrifice.

So what happened at the transfiguration? The Gospels tell the story. Jesus took Peter, James and John, up a high mountain — traditionally Mount Tabor in central Galilee, but nobody knows for sure. It wasn't all the disciples who went up the mountain, but only these three — Jesus' closest friends, the men he relied on to understand him best, the men in whom he invested the most effort to instruct them in the kingdom of God. If these three didn't "get it," nobody would. And in the Gospels we see that even these closest disciples didn't quite "get it" at first.

Once they were up on the mountain, an incredible thing happened: Jesus was changed before their very eyes. Mark says, "His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could

bleach them” (Mark 9:3). Luke says that while Jesus was praying, “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning” (Luke 9:29). It was an *epiphany*, a manifestation of the Father’s glory in the Son.

In our evangelical Protestant heritage, we’re so used to having everything explainable and understandable. That’s why evangelical churches lay so much stress on teaching the Word of God. That’s why the sermon is such a big thing in our Sunday worship, and why our Pastoral Search Committee is so eager to hear a prospective candidate preach before bringing him here to Union Congregational. But I have to ask you, how is a *talking head* going to make something like Jesus’ transfiguration understandable to us?

On that mountain, the disciples didn’t hear a lecture, or an exposition of some truth or doctrine. Instead, they had an experience of what scholars call the *numinous* — an encounter with something mysterious, beyond any rational explanation, something that hits us at the “gut level.” The disciples saw the glory of the holy God, and they knew *intuitively* — not with their intellect alone — that they were in his radiant presence. And that’s what *worship* is supposed to be, at its core. To worship isn’t to listen to somebody talk or see somebody perform. To worship is to be awestruck by the majesty and *mystery* of Christ, in such a way that all we can do is humbly bow before him and exclaim, “My Lord and my God!”

Peter, James and John saw “the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). And then they saw something else. Two other mysterious figures appeared “in glorious splendor,” as Luke says, conversing with Jesus. They were Moses and Elijah, and Luke tells us they spoke with Jesus “about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31).

What’s going on here? Why these two men from the Old Testament story, Moses and Elijah? Moses is the great prophet of the *foundation* of Israel, God’s spokesman through whom he gave his covenant and his commandments and his law — the Torah, the Books of Moses. And Elijah is the prophet of the *consummation* of Israel in the day of the Lord. To see all this, we have only to read the *last three verses* of our English Old Testament, Malachi 4:4-6:

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

In other words, Moses and Elijah represent the fulness of God’s covenant with his chosen people. And here they appear with Jesus, speaking with him about his coming “departure” in Jerusalem. What are the Gospels telling us? That Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are the completion, the fulfillment, of everything God has planned for that special people he has called to serve him. For the disciples, the Holy Scriptures were the writings we call the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah are the beginning and the end of the Old Testament — and here they appear in glory speaking with Jesus about *his cross*, the true meaning and goal of all Scripture.

Peter didn’t understand this at first. He didn’t know what to make of this awesome, glorious appearance especially after Moses and Elijah showed up. Mark says he was frightened by this experience, and didn’t know what to say. And can we blame him? I would be scared, too. But it seems Peter wanted this vision to last till he could get his mind around it. He wants to stay on the “spiritual high” long enough to absorb it. Maybe that’s why he blurts out, “Rabbi, it’s a good thing *we’re* here. We’ll just put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah — so they can stick around for a while.”

But this encounter with the radiant holiness of the Lord isn’t something we can manage. We can’t put it in a box and take it home to remember it later. We can’t enshrine it in a shelter or a building so we can control it. In worship, we meet God on his own terms, not ours. Whenever his people gather, he’s present — the New Testament is clear about that — and we need always to celebrate his presence. But his coming into our midst isn’t so that we can bask in some kind of good feeling. He comes to us to reveal himself in his glory, and to speak to us about *who he is* and *what he wants us to do*.

And so it was with Peter and the others, for suddenly a mysterious cloud appeared, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7). These are almost the same words Jesus heard when the Holy Spirit came upon him at his baptism. These words are the

declaration that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord's Christ, the Messiah who is to redeem God's people and fulfill his purpose for them. Again and again in the Gospels, we meet with these reminders of who Jesus really is, as if the disciples just couldn't see it at first. And, in truth, it took Jesus' resurrection from the dead to drive home the point with finality — so that Peter could stand up on the Day of Pentecost and declare, "Therefore God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36).

But the voice from the cloud is more than a declaration of who Jesus is. The voice also utters a command, something we're to do in response. Whenever we encounter the *epiphany* of the glory of Christ, we also hear the voice of God telling us what to do. Sometimes God uses the voice of others to direct us; at the wedding of Cana, we hear it through Jesus' mother, who says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." And we hear a similar instruction here in the voice from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

It's not enough to say we've had an experience of God's presence, of his love and mercy. It's not enough to try to get him to *listen to us* in prayer, and answer our requests. When we meet Christ in his glory, we're to *listen to him* and obey him. We're to follow the voice that comes to us from the words of Holy Scripture, the voice of the Spirit of Christ that quickens Scripture to us, the voice of our informed conscience that draws us to the teachings of Jesus recorded for us in the Word of God.

No, Peter didn't understand all this at first, when he saw the transfigured Christ speaking with Moses and Elijah, and heard that voice from the cloud. I'm so glad Peter is in the Gospel story, because we can all identify with him — the dense, fumbling guy that just doesn't "get it" at first and has to have the truth pounded into his head till finally he begins to "see the light." And eventually Peter does "get it," he finally comes to understand what the transfiguration is all about. Later, looking back after many years as an apostle and preacher of Christ, he wrote about the transfiguration in his Second Letter:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Peter 1:16-19).

Notice how much of Peter's language is filled with the imagery of light: *glory, shining, dawn, morning star*. Peter, finally, "saw the light" and understood Jesus' mission. He understood how *brilliant* Jesus was, even in the sense that Jesus had a better idea of God's purpose than anyone else in that time and place. Yes, Jesus is our Healer and Savior and Lord, but he's also a smart guy, a thinker, a *brilliant intellect*. He takes all the false and partial ideas of how God is supposed to vindicate his people Israel, and carries them to a new and higher plane that includes God's purpose for *all* people, so that God's new Israel comes to include everyone — Jew, Gentile, European, Asian, African, male, female, rich, poor, young, old, educated, unschooled — *everyone* who calls on the name of Jesus and unites with him in the body of Christ. And, as the transfiguration shows, we all come into that higher purpose, and join the family of God, through the cross, through the "departure" he was to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem.

And so, Jesus is transfigured. But what about Peter? Does he come to share in the transfiguration of his Lord, so that his own life takes on the radiance of Christ? The New Testament suggests that something like that took place. I don't see how Peter could have done what he did, and taken the risks he took, unless a radical change took place in his life. We have only to think of what happened on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter stood up in the same city where Jesus had been crucified only a few weeks before and declared, "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. . . . Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:36, 38). Later, in the Book of Acts, we read that people carried their sick into the streets hoping that even Peter's *shadow* might fall on them, so they could be healed. Peter wasn't the only one; in the same book we read that people carried handkerchiefs or aprons from Paul's body and

placed them on the sick, and they were healed and delivered from evil spirits. The apostles were “larger than life.” They were transfigured, too, because *they had seen the Lord in his glory!*

This transfigured life is the life of the kingdom of God. And this life is for all of us, for every person who looks to Jesus. At the beginning of his Second Letter, Peter speaks of God’s promise that we might become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The apostle John writes, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). I don’t think we have to wait till the clouds part and a trumpet sounds to behold the Lord in his radiant glory. I think we behold him so, whenever we call on him in faith, and lift up his praise together, and listen to his Word, and gather about his table to receive the emblems of his life — the bread and the cup.

There have been times in my life when I couldn’t see the Lord, when I had no vision of his glory. I spent many long years thinking I had a better idea of what was really true than the men Peter wrote about in our Epistle, those those men who wrote down the Scriptures, who “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). Through a life of self-centered darkness, which brought great unhappiness both to me and to those who cared for me, I finally had to learn to “pay attention” to the words of God’s spokesmen of old, the prophets and apostles, “as to a light shining in a dark place.” When I began to see that light, and the radiance of the transfigured and risen Jesus, things began to change. My life began to be *transfigured*.

I don’t claim that if my shadow falls on you, you’ll get well, or if I send my shirt over to you your demons will go away. But I do know I’m happier now than I’ve ever been, and perhaps more useful to the Lord than I’ve ever allowed myself to be. That’s a transformation, a kind of transfiguration. I believe it comes from being in the presence of Jesus as he’s lifted up and exalted in our midst, till the mysterious radiance of *his* being comes to fill the dark places of *our* lives and heal our broken spirits. I believe, also, that it comes from being in Jesus’ presence with other believers, even if it’s just two or three like Peter, James and John who beheld Jesus *together*.

I can’t *preach* you into that transfigured life. I can’t *teach* you into it, or *explain* you into it. Our life is transformed when we see Jesus on our “holy mountain,” wherever that place may be for each of us. If you haven’t known the transfigured life, *turn your eyes upon Jesus*, and receive it along with these emblems of his life in our midst. If you’ve begun to experience a changed life, but are hungry for a greater transformation, Jesus has it in store for you if you’ll *turn your eyes upon Jesus* and “listen to him.” This transfigured life is ours to receive from God. For, as Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (Philippians 3:20-21).

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