



The Transfiguration

Clinging to the Light

[RCL]: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99 or 99:5-9; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration! Metamorphosis.

We recognize *metamorphosis*, the Greek word that means to change shape or to move from having one image to another, because of the process most of us encountered in school—the marvelous metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The word with the Latin roots, *transfiguration*, is associated more with spiritual experience, specifically this occasion recounted in Luke and in the other two synoptic gospels.

This is a luminous story and its light has blinded interpreters into flights of fancy or has left them, and us, simply dazzled. All the other gospel stories, before the resurrection, even the miracles or signs, are quite earthbound. There are sick and troubled women, crippled and blind men, miserable, possessed people, and they are all healed or liberated. Yet, always earthy. The miracles of Jesus are always other-directed. This one, however, concerns Jesus himself and has the atmosphere of the otherworldly surrounding it.

This story takes us and the three chosen disciples to a height where the veil is rent for a few seconds probably, seconds that must have seemed like hours. It's important to remember *when* this event occurs in the chronology of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has started preparing his beloved disciples for his death. He knows what awaits him: he has challenged what we would call the status quo of the religious authorities of his day; he has shown that his values are not their values; his focus has been the kingdom of heaven. But his disciples, time and again, fail to understand who he is and what it is that he is showing them, and he tells them time and time again what inevitable end awaits him. He asks them: "Who do the crowds say that I am?" and they answer with the famous names of their past—John the Baptist, Elijah, even Jeremiah. And then he asks them the most crucial question of all: "And who do *you* say that I am?"

Of course, it is Peter who answers: Peter, who had flashes of revelation and understanding to be replaced almost immediately by confusion, fear, or puzzlement. In this instance, he comes through with the declaration of recognition and of faith: "The Messiah of God." After this declaration, Jesus makes it clear to Peter and to us that this realization of his person is a gift from God. Matthew tells of Jesus responding,

“Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” The words take away the temptation to human pride.

Eight days have passed after this moment of revelation, and Jesus takes his three closest friends on a hike to a mountain—not named, but guessed at through the ages. It was not a surprising excursion; Jesus made it a habit of going away in order to pray, to listen to his Father; being fully human, he cherished the companionship of his dear friends whenever he removed himself from the crowds. The mountain he chose was a high one so the trek must have taken all day, and night must be approaching. The three disciples must wonder at times how it is that they get so worn out from the constant walking and the crowds pressing upon them; but the demands of all the needy people on their master, who seems never to stop, having nowhere to lay his head, must appall them. “How does he keep going?” they are probably asking themselves. They must also have recognized that prayer was a lifeline for their teacher. They have accompanied him, but now they are probably longing to rest and sleep while Jesus is at his prayers.

Suddenly, all tiredness is forgotten. A bright light dazzles them, but the light is Jesus himself. Instead of the familiar head and shape of their teacher, they see something like the light of the sun—brilliant and blinding. Jesus is transformed before them. He is no longer the tired man who has walked miles and miles, who has been pulled and pushed by a crowd, but he is a shining being that somehow does not seem to be of this world. He is bathed in glory. The sight must have filled the three disciples with such awe that they could not move or open their mouths. But as their eyes become accustomed to the brilliance emanating from their once familiar teacher, they behold two more persons near him.

Why did they think the persons were Moses and Elijah? There were no representations in the Hebrew tradition. Certainly, there were no photographs and no paintings or sculptures of the two greats in their history. Did Jesus call them by name? We are not told. And if they represent the Law and the Prophets respectively, why imagine that one of them is Elijah instead of the great Isaiah as representative of the prophets? No answer is given. One is tempted to suspect that because six days before they had responded that the crowd thought Jesus was a new Moses or a new Elijah the names were available to their brains. Regardless. The surmise is that the two were encouraging him to face what was to come. And now Peter starts babbling.

And who can blame him? Below the mountain, the dangers and the darkness are approaching. The early, heady days of ministry are gone. Now Pharisees and Sadducees are clamoring to trip their beloved teacher at every turn, and Jesus himself keeps dropping hints of his own early death. It is all so frightening. This, this is so much better. Here there is light and beauty and safety among heavenly beings. Jesus is finally where he belongs—in the Other Realm which is bathed in Light. Peter doesn’t want this moment to stop. How many of us have prayed for the same thing—for the joyful times to linger, for people we love not to die, for darkness and depression and sadness not to return? We can imagine Peter later in his life telling this story to his nephew Mark, who would write it all down. “I told the Lord that we should stay there. I said I would build three cabins so they could stay—one for him, one for Elijah and one for Moses. I guess I thought we three would just stay on the ground gazing at their light. I didn’t know what I was saying.”

Mark and Luke mention this: “for he didn’t know what he was saying.” Would any of us have known? To have a glimpse of heaven, to see the one we have admired for so long revealing himself in all his glory, to be bathed in that blessed light of heaven—who would not want to stay in that bliss?

And there is more. A voice from heaven booms to tell them: “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” Terrified now, they fall on their faces. And then, just as suddenly, they are alone and Jesus looks as he always did. His time has not yet come, but the cross cannot be avoided. They will go down from the mountain and Jesus will set his face toward Jerusalem. Arrest, torture, and death are awaiting him.

Why did this moment of Transfiguration happen? Matthew calls it *orama*, a vision. They must wonder as they go down the mountain. Was it real? Did Peter and James and John remember it afterward when they were watching him through the agonizing hours on the Via Dolorosa? We are given no hint that they did. Perhaps after the Resurrection and his appearances to them, they remembered that moment on the mountain and understood. But again, we are not told. It is very possible that the Transfiguration happened because Jesus needed it. His three friends just happened to be there to witness the glory. What was awaiting Jesus was a horror beyond words – not just on his physical body, but in the terrible abandonment he felt on the cross. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He needed those moments of encouragement and of light on the Mount of Transfiguration. In the times of fear and desperation in this life, we all do. When the darkness is approaching, let us cling to the Light.

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