

The Transfiguration of Jesus *Based on Matthew 17:1 – 13 and 2Peter 1: 16-21 February 26.17*

The incredible story of the transfiguration—that’s a weird word, isn’t it? Not one we use a lot for sure. Transfigured is the English translation of the Greek word *metamorphosis* which in English means to change from one shape to another—like a butterfly does. And transformation means changing in nature. Now Jesus’ nature or shape didn’t really change, he shone with the brilliance of the light of God, which is why I suspect that the English word transfiguration is used instead. To transfigure means to change in outward appearance. Ok, so enough with the English lesson! And back to our story: Jesus takes John, James & Peter, just three of the twelve disciples up the mountain with him. We don’t know actually which mountain, but scholars think either Mount Tabor or Mount Horeb. It was not an uncommon thing for Jesus to withdraw from the crowds that followed him to a quiet place, often to pray. I wonder if that’s what the 3 disciples were thinking that Jesus was taking them to pray.

So they’re trekking up the mountain, heads down, watching where they’re placing their feet, following behind Jesus. Just as they reach the summit of the mountain, it’s getting lighter and lighter. They look up, searching for the source of the unexpected light and Jesus is changing--transforming before their very eyes--an unnatural brilliance changes first his face, then his clothing. It’s like he’s plugged into some kind of divine electrical system. “His face is shone like the sun, his clothes dazzling white” (v2). They try to watch, but it’s hard to see him, he’s so bright, their eyes are having trouble adjusting to the incredible brilliance. And then, out of seemingly nowhere, there’s a couple of other guys up there with him, can it be? It is—that ‘s Moses and Elijah! And Jesus and these two ancient prophets are having a good old chinwag, like three old friends who’ve just met up on the street corner, instead of a mountaintop with Jesus shining brighter than the sun. Peter is awestruck, babbling away about wanting to build some shrines to the three prophets –maybe thinking he’d like to commemorate this experience forever.

And then a bright cloud descends, enveloping them all in it—rather like the cloud Moses disappeared into when he went up the mountain to speak to God. And like the cloud that Elijah was lifted up into when he left earth. What does this mean? This is scary! Then THE VOICE: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” Peter, James and John are literally struck down in awe and fear. Well, I should think they would be, I mean, wouldn’t you be? And just as quickly as it began, it’s over, and the disciples are alone again with Jesus, the regular every day Jesus is back. Even so, they’re still overwhelmed, and Jesus, compassionate and caring, is reassuring them, hand on their shoulders, telling them ‘hey guys, it’s ok, you don’t need to be afraid.’ I think it would be hard to feel any other way! On the way back down the mountain he tells them not to share the experience with anyone else, until he has been raised from the dead.

This mountaintop experience for the disciples is most assuredly transformative one for them. It is on mountaintops where historically for the people of Israel, their leaders met God! It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the ten commandments, and when he came down the mountain back to the people, he had to veil his face

—so brightly did it shine. And the great prophet Elijah heard God in the sheer silence in a cave on “Mount Horeb, the mount of God”. (*1Kings 19:8*)

Now, we need to put this mountaintop experience into context, it comes just six days after Jesus tells his disciples of the sacrifices that they need to make if they want to be his followers. They will need to deny themselves and take up their own crosses and follow him. And those who want to save their own lives will actually lose them, and those who lose their lives for his sake will find them. A message of complete surrender to God’s will in Christ, to finding your true life by living God’s will for you, instead of your own will - true transformation. And this the absolute example of Jesus’ life isn’t it? Next Jesus tells them of his own pending death.

Jesus is preparing them for the time when he will no longer be with them in person, for the challenge ahead for his followers living in the world when he no longer walks with them. And his transfiguration anticipates this event.¹ Jesus is showing them that he is filled with the everlasting light of God, and that the light of life shines even after death, even after his death. That’s why he tells them not to talk about this until after his resurrection, because this experience will be even more meaningful then, they will understand it better— and understand it more fully in the light of his resurrection. And we do hear that, in the scripture reading from Peter’s second letter (*2Peter 1: 16-21*). Peter tells his own followers of that experience on the holy mountain, he was an eyewitness to Christ’s glory — confirming the power of the Almighty God, in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter heard God’s voice confirming Jesus’ identity, his son-ship as it were, he heard God saying: This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him. Now, when did we in this church last hear those words? The beginning of the Epiphany season actually, at Jesus’ Baptism back in the beginning of January, and here we are on the last Sunday after the Epiphany, and we hear these same words again. Rather timely, I think to hear this story of the Transfiguration, as we approach Lent, a time of repentance and personal reflection, when we read about and reflect on the sacrifice and death of Jesus, which often feels like a darker side of our Christian tradition. It’s a good reminder for us, that even in the deepest darkness, even when we’re feeling bereft, alone, or we wonder where God is, that Christ is the light, and the light shines in the deepest darkness, guiding our way. Jesus calls us to walk along with him, to experience his transformative, metamorphosing power in ourselves, so we can be transformed.

I’m going to bet that for most of you, your own personal experiences and encounters with the Divine – a theophany is the technical term-- yours may not be quite as exhilarating or as intense as the happenings on the mountaintop that day. Not many of us are ready to experience that. After all, Jesus didn’t take all twelve up the mountain with him! But when you do experience a theophany, you know, it’s palpable, you can just feel it. Or other times we maybe don’t see Jesus in the experience right away, and only recognize it for what it truly was when we look back on it, or relive it, talk about it with others.

¹ Maryetta Madelleine Anschutz in Pastoral Perspective for Matthew 17: 1-9. [Feasting on the Word](#), Year A Vol 1 p. 454

How do we experience the transforming power of Jesus? Maybe by partaking of the bread and wine of Holy Communion, literally taking into ourselves the strengthening power of Jesus. Or in prayer—confessing to God your sins and the sense of uplifting joy, in the knowing that God has forgiven you, that you are really forgiven. And with that you know that you can forgive someone else who has wronged you. Or maybe in an ‘aha moment’ at a bible or book study, when you suddenly ‘get it’; and come to an even deeper knowledge and love of God and your own faith. Or experience how the power of prayer changes you deep inside, the power that heals body and spirit, which I hope some of you may have experienced at our healing services. The feeling of holy oil in the shape of a cross on your forehead, helping you to really understand you are a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ.

Jesus calls us to walk with him, to follow him up the mountain, and give ourselves, our lives to God, calling us to a deeper experience of him, just as he called Peter, James and John that day. Sometimes those experiences are difficult; Jesus never said it would be easy. But we do not walk alone. When we choose to walk with Jesus, not only will we witness what God’s power in Jesus is capable of, but it will transform us as well. We will each experience it in our own way, and sometimes it’s overwhelming or scary, but Jesus is there with us, ready to put a reassuring hand on our shoulder, telling us it’s ok, and that we don’t be afraid.

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