

Last Sunday of Epiphany Year A
Transfiguration Sunday
February 26, 2017
Matthew 17:1-9
'Transfiguration transforms us'

The Transfiguration is a dramatic event, and Matthew tells it Hollywood style, think Cecille B. DeMille. Appropriate that tonight is the Oscar awards.

I can take a part in the parables, or imagine myself sitting at Jesus' feet at Martha and Mary's house. I can even see myself at the feeding of the 5,000. But, I have trouble placing myself in the story of the Transfiguration. To me, it is an 'out there' passage, to which I have trouble relating and therefore inwardly digesting. Is it myth? Metaphor? Fact? Alternative fact?

The Transfiguration isn't really about what happened to Jesus, on the mountaintop, and I have stopped trying to think about it that way. The Transfiguration is about what happened to and for the disciples. The event - the vision - was an invitation to them - to be transformed and changed. To see Jesus differently.

'Transfigure' is different from 'transform' - to transform is to change or convert the internal or external form, (trans-form). Transformation suggests something new emerges. Trans-figuration is about changing the outward appearance *so as to* glorify or exalt. *Transfiguration* is more about *our* perception, what we already know is there begins to appear differently to us.

Before the disciples went up the mountain with Jesus, they perceived him as rabbi, healer, teacher, prophet. Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Son, but the others had not. On the mountaintop, they perceived Jesus as divine, the Son of God. The Transfiguration - how *they* saw Jesus - transformed the disciples. Something new emerged in them.

Are you familiar with the Rubin Vase? It is one of the most famous black and white positive/negative illusions. It is a two-dimensional artwork - looking at the black, there are two faces looking directly at one another. Focusing instead on the white, there is a curved vase. Rubin was a psychologist who created this image around 1915. He was interested in the way images can play around with our visual perception. There are other positive/negative images, not quite so famous - in some it is easy to see both illusions, and in others very difficult.

Not everyone sees the same image first. Sometimes the first perception of image (either the black or the white) is so strong it is nearly impossible to 'reset' your vision to see the second image.

That Rubin vase or face changes back and forth, depending on *our* perception. The picture itself does not change; its form remains a flat fixed image in black and white.

Human relationships offer another example of transfiguring change. Some claim they met their

spouse and experienced ‘love at first sight’. For most of us, over time our perception of the other – the spouse to be – shifts and one day, or one evening, we realize we love this particular person. We see our soul mate in *this* person and no other. The object of our love has not changed, but our perception has changed so that he/she is transfigured, exalted or glorified by our love. And, we in turn are changed – transformed – into relationship.

In the Exodus story, the people of God are in the wilderness area of Mount Sinai. The mountain was an active volcano in those days, and so approaching it, much less climbing it, would be a fearful and awe-inspiring experience. Ancient people saw the power of God in what we moderns consider the ‘natural phenomenon’ of volcanic activity, and they associated God’s presence with high places. Vertical theology. The Exodus passage contains imagery consistent with an active volcano – a cloud covering it and a devouring fire visible to the people below.

To spend forty days and forty nights on the mountaintop, as Moses did, was an act of great courage. Moses had been in conversation with God since God called him to lead the people from Egypt. But God said to Moses, “*I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after*”. Ex. 19:9. Moses obediently climbed the mountain, and the cloud rested on the mountaintop. Moses’ trip to the mountaintop was for the people, not for Moses.

When Moses descended, the people saw that the skin of his face was shining. The people of Israel recognized this as proof that Moses had been in the presence of the Lord. [Ex. 34:29-35] Proof certain. They trusted him, and listened to his words as God speaking through Moses.

Jesus’ divinity was always there – in the beginning according to John’s Gospel, and certainly from the moment of conception as the story is told in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus invites James, John and Peter to climb the mountain with him. On the mountaintop, the disciples see – dramatically and unequivocally – the divinity, the God connection, and they hear God’s voice confirming Jesus as the Son. Jesus is transfigured before them.

The revelation is so amazing, so enrapturing, that they want to hold it, cherish it, stay in that exquisite moment of relationship. Peter suggests they build tents and live right where they are. The transfiguration is about spiritual intimacy, God speaking to the disciples, God in Christ.

The disciples’ carry their new perception down the mountain and into their everyday lives. The disciples obey God’s command, *listen to him*, because they have seen this transfiguration. It is their spiritual awakening, when they understand Jesus as both human and divine. And so it should be with us. Both divine and human. Like the Rubin vase, two images in one.

Which do you see first? For many of us, we start Lent with the human image of Jesus firmly in mind. As Jesus begins that final walk, the Way of the Cross, we begin to see the divine image more strongly, possibly because the painful human suffering of the cross is so hard to contemplate.

A spiritual awakening is often described as a trip to the mountaintop, the revelation coming at the peak. The mountaintop is a liminal place, a thin place, where we are separated from familiar surroundings and the busy-ness of everyday life. Where we are likely to notice that the living God is with us.

The problem with the mountaintop metaphor is that once at the peak, we are isolated, separated from all that brought about the awakening. The spiritual awakening must carry us down from the mountaintop, back into the messiness, the muck of the everyday world.

Jesus already knew who he was – he did not go up on the mountain to talk to God, or to discover his identity. The Transfiguration is for the disciples, so that they would know beyond a doubt, who Jesus is, and *therefore listen* to him. Experience God in Christ.

In 2 Peter, Peter offers his eye-witness account of the day. His experience gave him certainty – “*We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty*”. An offer of proof, the why and wherefore of Peter’s belief.

The transfiguration alerts us to the ‘something more,’ something intangible, in the faith based recognition of God *in* Christ.

The disciples and the many followers of Jesus looked for signs, miracles. ‘Show us you are who you say you are’ is the lyric from the 1970's musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. We do the same thing – answer my prayer, heal my friend....then I will *know*. We ask God – or Jesus – to offer proof.

When transfiguration – that is the realization of Jesus’ glory, of God in Christ – does occur in our lives, it is very personal. It is a moment of spiritual intimacy and relationship that cannot be denied, a gradual dawning and experience of the Christ at the center of your life.

Nearly twenty years ago, one of the elderly members of our congregation participated in our first Education for Ministry Class. She collected and wrote many meditations and prayers – yet she often said she had not experienced God ‘dropping in’ on her – no transforming moments, or epiphanies or transfigurations in her faith journey. ‘Where’s mine?’ she would exclaim when someone recounted a time when he or she felt God’s presence in their life. She was confined to a wheelchair for nearly a year before her death; during that time, she began to experience afternoons spent walking with Jesus (or so she said) – and the realization came to her that Jesus had, indeed, walked with her all her life.

Epiphany? Transfiguration? Transformation? I don’t know that we need to name it. For her, God was no longer hidden in a cloud on the mountaintop, but mediated in the person of Jesus Christ, who walked with her.

During Epiphany we celebrate the revelation to the whole world that Jesus is the Son of God.

The Transfiguration is the Epiphany of all epiphanies. And the dramatic reminder that we should *listen to Jesus*.

For the disciples, the Transfiguration marked the difference between knowing Jesus as prophet and knowing Jesus as Son of God. In Glasgow Scotland this year, a verse from the Quran was read as part of an Epiphany liturgy. The verse acknowledged Jesus as prophet, but denied Jesus as Son. (Regardless of the appropriateness of using the Quran in the liturgy) the point is made: Epiphany marks the change in understanding of Jesus as the light of the world.

Do we need a personal experience? Our own mountaintop? What does it take to persuade you to *listen to Jesus*?

We, too, can accept the Lord's invitation to the mountaintop — use the days of Lent to separate ourselves from the familiar surroundings of everyday life, to ponder the epiphanies in our lives, and to notice those times when God has shown up in our lives.

Which image do you see first? Jesus as human? Or God in Christ? Can you see both at one time? It is important to see both. And a reminder that every person you meet is more than you think they are. Our first impression is not the whole person.

The Transfiguration invites us to be transformed and changed: To take what we brought into the room with us (or up on the mountain) and be transformed into witnesses to God in Christ.

Accept that invitation. Look for unexpected insights. Awesome majesty. Times when God dropped in on *you*.

You will never be quite the same again.

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