



SERMONS THAT WORK

Transfiguration

A Vision of Glory

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

This day we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord. During this season after Pentecost—often labeled the “Green Season”—we are awoken on this feast day by a mountaintop experience. We are invited to stand with Peter, James, and John to witness a profound revelation of glory and majesty in Christ’s transformed appearance.

It might be because this Transfiguration scene seems so unbelievable that we read it twice a year: once on the last Sunday after the Epiphany and here at the beginning of August. Indeed, there is so much compacted in these few verses that it takes time to wrestle with their details and let their beauty sink in. There is the disciples’ challenging prayer trek up a mountain with Jesus. There is the dramatic change in our Lord’s countenance, his clothes becoming “dazzling white” as the chosen disciples see something of God’s glory. There is the ethereal appearance of Moses and Elijah alongside Jesus, and Peter’s odd, utterly human invitation to set up three tents to domesticate the depth passing before his eyes.

Three of the gospels refer to Jesus’ transfiguration. Though some of the particularities vary, the bones of the story remain the same: handpicked, Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up a mountain; Jesus’ countenance is changed in the company of Moses and Elijah; the three disciples find themselves shrouded by a cloud, out of which a voice reminds them to listen to His beloved Son.

Though the three disciples were likely exhausted from the mountain trek, Luke’s telling is the only one that highlights their sleepiness and their coming-to at the blinding revelation of Jesus’s glory, flanked by two prominent Old Testament figures. When the disciples are roused by this series of dreamlike events, their spiritual senses are heightened. Bleary-eyed, Peter, James, and John witness a scene so piercingly strange and gloriously beautiful that its viewing will surely alter their lives.

And that, of course, is the point. Through this gloriously beautiful vision, the disciples are transformed, themselves transfigured, as they awake to the startling reality of who this Jesus is. It is as if those three disciples are let in on the blueprints of the divine plan. They see Jesus transfigured. They see him in the context of the law and the prophets, in the context of those stories of deliverance and promise which have sustained God’s people generation after generation.

There is something that vision affords us that sound or taste or touch cannot. Have you ever sensed that soaring feeling deep within at the sight of a sunset? Or witnessed the startlingly pure innocence in the eyes of a newborn? Beauty has the ability to change us; it has the capacity to connect us to ourselves and to the world we inhabit. There is something within us that seeks this beauty out, that pressures us to wake at sunrise or to hurry for the birth of a grandchild.

A desire to see God, in all God's searing beauty, it seems, is no different. No wonder then that seeing God and the things of God has been a prominent theme throughout the history of the Church. Perhaps this abiding interest is native to us as human beings, worked into the very fabric of who God created us to be. Perhaps we seek a vision of the Divine precisely because we read in John's gospel that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18), and we refuse to be denied. Perhaps the desire to see God works its way into our spiritual imaginations because of the multiple scriptures that attest to it. Regardless of the precise reason why, glimpsing a vision of God has the power to transform us, even as that vision reveals more of who God is.

The Transfiguration scene unfurls more of what God is up to. God's very Son, the one in and with whom the Father is well-pleased, is now seen in concert with the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). Other commentators have also noted that Moses and Elijah signify Jesus' connection to both the living and the dead, as we have a record of Moses' death, but only mention of Elijah being "taken up". Still, Moses' and Elijah's appearance are not only symbolic. No, these two Old Testament figures speak to Jesus' "departure" (literally, his "exodus") and that "which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem". Here, Peter, James, and John experience Jesus as not only God's favored Son but also as the Christ, the anointed one whose face is set toward Jerusalem.

It is unsurprising that the Transfiguration narrative is one of the most artistically reproduced in the history of the Church. Transfiguration frescoes, mosaics, and icons abound, and have ever since at least the mid-sixth century CE. I say this is unsurprising because visual representation evokes mystery and symbolism which mere words cannot. The setting on a mountain, the presence of Moses and Elijah, the mysterious cloud, and the booming fatherly voice all have the ability to cause our spiritual imaginations to run wild. Such a vision, saturated with symbols and signs, serves as a veritable feast for the eyes.

The challenge incumbent on us as readers and hearers is to allow the humanity of this scene, and not only the strange, heavenly brightness, resonate in our hearts and minds. For it is in the midst of the disciples' exhaustion and Peter's unknowing proposal to set up camp, that we see the glory of the Transfiguration shining. It is among the disciples' dusty, swollen feet, the spent muscles and thinning air, that they experience remarkable transformation. To allow the grit and fatigue, the inevitable blisters and understandable confusion, to permeate this scene opens to us a door to that beauty that could easily be lost at first glance.

We can take heart that it is in the same cracks of our own humanity—in those places that feel most alienated from the lives we experience or from the God we profess—that God’s glory shines still. The sweetness of the Transfiguration is that we are invited into a scene that typifies the collision of heaven and earth, with Jesus the Christ at its core. Each of us is invited to glimpse God’s glory, to see for ourselves that there is the possibility for dramatic change at the hands of the Divine.

This is a lot to take in when you are out of breath on the mountaintop. It is a lot to wrap our hearts and minds around at any time, really. Take time to sit with the Transfiguration in all its richness. Roll over its symbolism and strangeness. Bask in the glory that shines brightly from the lines of this narrative. And finally, take heart that God’s timeless glory shines in the world and in our hearts this day, even in the throes of exhaustion and confusion. *Amen.*

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