



SERMONS THAT WORK

The Feast of the Transfiguration

To Be Transfigured

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

Today we're celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration, so we get to hear, again, this familiar story. In fact, since we also hear the same story every year on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, this is probably one of the most frequent Gospel readings in the Church's calendar. We get it a lot.

As a sort of prelude to the Transfiguration, I want to talk just a bit about *hermeneutics*—which is just a fancy name for how we go about approaching and interpreting the Bible. It's important stuff, and we need to have some sense of a decent approach to the Bible, and especially to the Gospels, if we're going to take them as seriously as they deserve.

Too often these days I keep running into the notion that what matters most about stories from the Bible, especially stories that are unusual—miracles, healings, or just plain peculiar stuff, like the Transfiguration—is *that you believe it*, that you think it really happened in a 21st century historical way. And that bothers me for a couple of reasons. First of all, it trivializes the faith and the Bible by turning them into a sort of believing contest. Second, it impoverishes these special stories by setting them apart from everything else and pretending that the most important thing about them is that they happened. That just won't do.

Sure, there are all sorts of interesting textual and historical issues with stories like the Transfiguration—it may have been a post-Resurrection appearance that got misplaced in early manuscripts; it may be a theologically inspired parable that developed in the first century; and so on. But that's not what matters most. At the same time, there is simply no reasonable doubt that Jesus did amazing things, and that life around him was very interesting and full of surprises. But that's not what matters most, either. We all know that God can do special stuff.

These perplexing stories are really just exactly like the more ordinary stuff in the Gospels—things like Jesus' teachings, his sayings about himself and about God and about the Kingdom of God. After all, the most important thing about, say, the Sermon on the Mount, or the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is not that Jesus actually said those specific words—after all, Matthew and Luke disagree about what those words are. The most important thing about them is what they *mean*—what they meant for the people, place, and time where they were said, and what they mean for us in this place and time.

It's not enough just to believe the Bible (whatever that means); we are called to engage the struggle of trying to *understand* it—of trying to make it real and present for us in ways that matter to our lives and to our world. After all, the strong conviction that unusual things happened a long time ago in a place far, far

away really doesn't say anything at all about our lives now—no matter how hard we believe it. Such unexamined belief is also an easy way out; it's a way of dismissing the significance of something by simply saying we believe it and stopping there.

Do keep this in mind when you read and when you hear people talk about the Bible.

On to the Transfiguration. This is a story about who Jesus is, and what it is like to follow Jesus, and mostly, it's a story about hope, real hope. We know that the Church has taught from the very beginning that Jesus is fully a human being, and at the same time, fully divine. These days, with the safety of distance and, alas, of centuries of sugary art and decades of terrible movies, it is pretty easy to think of Jesus as being divine—but we can have trouble with how that fits in with his being fully human. (So, people worry about silly things like whether Jesus could speak English if he were pressed, or if, the week before the Last Supper, Jesus knew who would win the 2020 presidential election.)

But in his own lifetime, and during the lifetime of the apostles, there was no doubt about Jesus' humanity. People saw him and talked with him and ate with him and watched him live the life of a man in first century Palestine. And, no, he didn't glow in the dark or walk around looking all Hollywood goofy and godly. So, the Transfiguration was, in the first century, a story about the divinity of Jesus. It was there to remind people that this man they may have known and may have seen was more than just one more charismatic teacher. He was the beloved of God in a unique and powerful way. The full glory of the Father was part of who Jesus—this guy they knew—actually was. That's one part of what the story means, a part that was probably more important in the first century than it is today.

Another part of what the story means is that Jesus trumps the Bible. Really. Moses symbolized the Law, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, which was the only Bible the apostles or the early Church knew, and Elijah symbolized the Prophets, who made up pretty much the rest of that Bible. So, for the Law and the Prophets to be there, but to vanish, and then for the disciples to be told to listen to Jesus alone, this is one way of saying that, if you have to choose between the Law and the Prophets (the Bible of the day) or Jesus, you choose Jesus. There is a clear priority here—and while the point is not to ignore Moses or Elijah, it is to show who has pride of place. As Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth-century commentator says, "Moses and Elijah appeared beside [Jesus] so that they might know that he was Lord of the Prophets." We need to remember that, too.

That part of the story was very important to the early Church, as it tried to figure out how to handle the Old Testament, and it's a very important thing for us to remember, too. (By the way, that's one reason Peter was not to build three booths—doing that would suggest that Jesus was only *equal* to the Law and the Prophets.)

A third part of what the story means was so obvious to the apostles and the early Church that they hardly noticed it—they knew it all along, down to their very bones. But it may be the most important part for us. This is the reality that who Jesus really is cannot be known from only one picture, from only one experience, no matter how intense and glorious, or from only one perspective. Coming to know Jesus is not an event, it is a journey. You can't stop with just one "wow" and assume you've got it. Jesus left the mountain, still a mystery and a puzzle to the disciples, who were told not to blab about this partial insight into the Lord.

That's because even the Transfiguration did not give enough light to see Jesus fully. To see him fully

required the whole journey; it required walking the road ahead, all of that road. And it is only by making the whole of their journey with Jesus, a journey they did not anticipate and could not have imagined, a journey that led to Golgotha and beyond, it was only by doing this that they came to realize both who Jesus really was, and how confused and incomplete any attempt to pin him down to any one moment would be. They could no more point to the Transfiguration than they could to a sleeping friend or an executed criminal and say, “This is it, this is who he is, I’ve figured it all out.” That’s why the Gospels have lots and lots of stories and sayings. No single story or saying is enough—no single experience is enough—and no one can know the whole of who Jesus is and what he is about until that person has walked all of his or her entire journey with Jesus.

In fact, the whole Church cannot know fully who Jesus is until the whole Church has walked its entire journey with Jesus, a journey we are still walking, a journey that is far from over.

Again, that first generation of Christians knew that, back then. But we need to be especially mindful of this reality today. The one who stands transfigured before us today, and crucified on Good Friday, and raised on Easter, and who is with his Church forever, this one, Jesus himself, is still leading us along the bumpy road down the mountain—patiently putting up with our wrong turns, our stubborn blindness, and our failures to trust enough or to love enough. We cannot stop at any one place and say, “Here it is, we have it all nailed down” (that’s the *other* reason Peter could not build a dwelling for Jesus). As long as we are in the midst of the journey, Jesus has not set up a permanent address among us. We don’t know it all, and we pretend to do so at our peril.

The journey of faith, the journey of discovery, the journey of our lives and of the life and ministry of Jesus, these continue. And on that journey, Jesus is both our companion on the way, gradually revealing to us and to our generation who he is and who he will have us be, and at the same time, to use Peter’s words, he is for us “a lamp shining in a dark place,” in our dark places, and in the darkness of the world.

That is where our hope lies; that light will never fail us. No darkness will ever fully overcome us: and this journey of ours, a journey we share with all who are Christ’s, this journey will, at the end of the day, lead us safely home. To believe in the Transfiguration is not merely to talk about history—to believe in the Transfiguration is to dare our own journey with Jesus, and it is to embrace this hope.

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