

“TRANSFIGURATION”

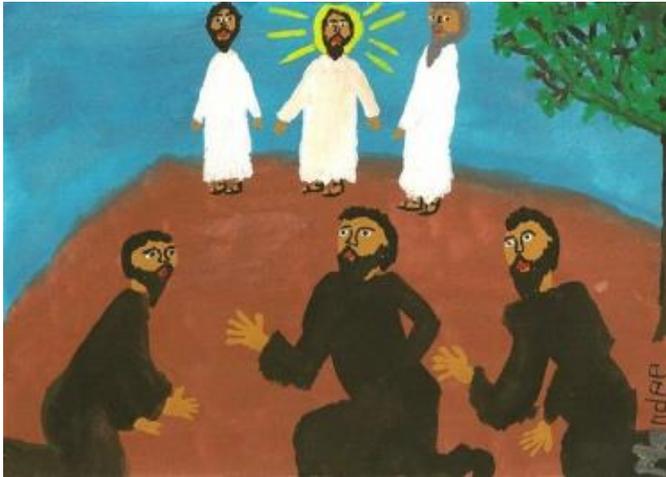
Matthew 17:1-20

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This story we call “the transfiguration” is a strange one. It’s beautiful, mysterious, thought-provoking, full of interesting details. It offers a range of theological ideas and images to explore. It’s important, because it’s found in Mark and Luke as well as Matthew. But it’s hard to understand just exactly why it’s here. What’s the point of it?

Was it for the disciples,



for Peter, James and John, the ones who hiked up that mountain with Jesus? Was this meant to be a brief interlude of encouragement and uplift for them in the middle of a journey with Jesus that was already turning out to be... a bit harder than they expected. Are they invited to be present for this glimpse of glory to remind them who Jesus is and how important his ministry is? Is this meant to prepare them to believe in the resurrection when, in a few short chapters, everything looks hopeless?

Or... was it for Jesus?



Was this time of communion with the two great leaders of God's people – Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet – an imparting of strength and courage and purpose for the hard road that lay ahead of him? Did the divine affirmation he heard confirm the direction of his ministry? Did the glory of that moment make him more sure of transcending death?

Or... is it mostly for the sake of the larger story the gospel writers are trying to convey?



So that we (and people like us through the ages) can see and sense something of the glory and complexity and holiness that his followers found so compelling about Jesus? To drive home the theological point about Jesus' divine and human nature, and to stress that this was *always* who Jesus was, through his ministry? To prepare us for the even bigger (and even harder to believe) miracle of resurrection to come?

I don't know the answer. Maybe the incident serves all these purposes. But it's certainly significant that it takes place in the *middle* of the story. It's neither a grand inaugural or a triumphant ending but an interlude in the midst of a journey filled with challenges which are both spiritual and physical.



You might have noticed that it starts out with the words "Six days later..." which of course makes one ask "six days later than what?" A glance back into chapter 16 shows us that six days earlier Jesus and his disciples were having a conversation in which he was explaining to

them that he needed to go to Jerusalem, and that there he would suffer and die. At least one of them outright rejects this idea. As for the others... we don't know; maybe they hear it in stunned silence. Jesus then goes on to tell them that all those who follow him must understand that they too are choosing sacrifice and suffering, self-denial, a cross, ... but this is the way that leads to life.

We aren't told anything about what happened over the next six days. Maybe they needed six full days to think about all that.

It's a process, a journey, they're on with Jesus. And the glory comes right in the middle of it, just as it's getting difficult, just, perhaps, when they might want to pack it in.



The unexpected experience Peter, John, and James have on that mountain just about does them in. We see immediately that they don't know what to think, what to do, how to react. The instinct is to do something constructive - literally.

But the light and holiness of God's presence quickly silences Peter's impulsive plans to capture the experience.



This is not something they can understand or manage or control. For a while the fear overwhelms them. But they are soon directed to turn their attention and their confidence back to Jesus, whom they now have seen in a whole new light. He reaches out, touches them, tells them not to be afraid. And pretty soon they're following him back down the mountain, back (we might say) to the real world.

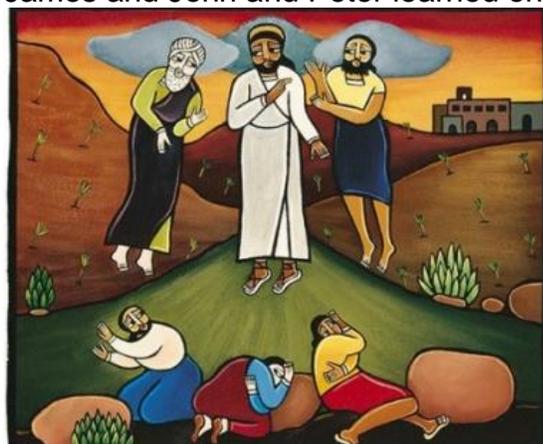
And there is no time for a gradual easing back into things. Peter, James and John are still trying to understand what they have seen, when they are confronted with a crowd and a heart-rending story of suffering:



a father's fears for his son who has epilepsy (which in those days they believed was caused by demons). The family has apparently sought help from others of Jesus' disciples who had no help to offer. Here just as much as on the mountaintop, the disciples do not know what to say or do. Again, Jesus steps in; he speaks a healing word, and the boy is cured. The text tells us nothing about anyone seeing Jesus radiant and glowing, but surely for this boy and his family and community that moment can't have been less glorious than the scene on the mountain. I think this is transfiguration, too.

To his disciples, who couldn't help, Jesus suggests that something about their faith is lacking. It's not that they don't have *enough* faith. All he asks of them is faith like a grain of mustard seed – that's quite small!

Is it possible that they've been trying to serve – heal and help – from their own strength, their own resources, their own authority? Jesus seem to be suggesting that they need to put their trust not in their own abilities and strength but in God. It's not all that different from the lesson James and John and Peter learned on the mountain: listen to Jesus; don't be afraid.



It's difficult to know what to conclude about following Jesus from this series of stories. It would appear that neither in a "sacred" setting nor in a place of real-world need did Jesus' disciples have any idea what to do. They were interested, willing, open. They asked questions: why couldn't we heal him? How does the prophecy about Elijah's return fit into what we just saw? But they have a lot to learn about ministering to others. They have a lot to learn about worshipping God. In these stories their faith is definitely a work in progress. We can't tell for sure what they learned, or if they were changed. It's hard to imagine they weren't, but sometimes change takes time.

How might we find our own lives, our own journey with Jesus reflected in these stories? We should certainly notice that Jesus leads the disciples both to a place apart where they can experience God's presence *and* into a place of need and service. A lot of Christians prefer to either stay on the mountain or down in the valley. Some of us want to keep our focus on worship, prayer, and the connection we have with Christ individually or in the faith community. Some of us want to get out there and do good things – feed the hungry, help the sick, fight for justice, make the world a better place.

These stories remind us of two important things:



First, the journey we are on with Jesus takes us to the mountain and back down, through prayer *and* service, to the glorious *and* the mundane, to beauty *and* suffering. It's not our prerogative to skip half of the journey. If we are inclined to just roll up our sleeves and get busy, here we're reminded that we also need to pray, to listen, to give thanks, to just *be* in the presence of God. If we're inclined to construct a faith that's contained in church or in personal piety, here we're reminded that we also encounter Christ in others, and serve him as we serve them; there are lots of different ways we can serve others, but this is not an optional part of the journey.

Second, these stories remind us that both in worship and service most of us are rank beginners, bumbling about, with not a clue, often, about what we're doing, and in need of a lot of help and grace.

We so often come to worship, for example, wanting it on our own terms. I don't just mean that we want music we like and a sermon we agree with and a service that's structured in a particular way (and that ends on time). But more subtly, we want to know more or less what will happen, we have an idea of what we'd like to "get out of it," we expect to be fully in control of our degree of engagement. We only want God to move us so much and no more. But the transfiguration shows us that meeting God is not like that.

When we respond to Jesus' call to serve others – in whatever way – it's easy to focus on how fortunate we are, how much we have to offer, our ideas about what other people need and what we can do for them. But the post-transfiguration back-down-the-mountain story reminds us that we are not the saviors of anybody. We often don't know as much as we think we do. We can't help as much as we thought we could. Our goodwill and our gifts are sometimes not enough. Oftentimes this leads to cynicism. But this story shows us a more humble approach which at the same time offers a radical hope: a caring for others that emerges not from our own illusions of strength but from trust in the grace of God, knowing that this is what every one of us needs.

We are beginners, and maybe we're never going to get much beyond that, no matter how much we grow or how far we travel. But we are being changed. We are slowly, slowly learning to see Jesus. We are learning to see the world differently. We are learning to worship, to serve. We are being transformed. There's no better wisdom for this journey than what these stories offer:

Listen to Jesus. Don't be afraid. Have Faith.

This challenging journey that winds its way through glory and struggle is one that Jesus took before us, and one that he takes *with* us. This is who Jesus *is*. It's not two different Jesuses, on the mountain and in the crowd. What seem to us at first glance two different ways of being are the same life. The beauty of the sacred and the struggle of being human are, in him, one and the same. And so it is for all of us who are called to "take up the cross, and follow."



Writer Elizabeth Palmer says this:

“What a strange kind of glory this is: a divine power that refuses to hover above the earth in glorified form but instead climbs back down the mountain and walks straight to crucifixion....

“... this coexistence of divine glory and human suffering within a single body... means something for our lives. ...[I believe] that it means the most during those times when we are least optimistic, when we are least likely to be able to glimpse any beauty among the violence and selfishness that plague our society and mar our hearts.”

“...Novelist Marilynne Robison’s preacher character John Amos ...says this in a sermon: ‘It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance – for a moment or a year or the span of a life Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.’”

Quotes are from “Reflections on the Lectionary” in *The Christian Century*, February 1, 2017, p 19)

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