

*Spoiler Alert*

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**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Transfiguration of the Lord**  
**February 26, 2017**  
**2 Peter 1:16-21**  
**Matthew 17:1-9**

Today is the final Sunday of Epiphany, when we have been exploring and celebrating the ways in which the light of Christ is revealed in the history of humankind, and in our individual lives. The season of Epiphany is a bridge between Christmas and Lent. It begins with Epiphany Sunday, when we remember how wise men followed the brightest star in the night sky with single-minded determination, until they came to the manger where God lay.

The end of Epiphany is the Transfiguration of the Lord, when Christ's divinity is revealed to three of his disciples. Today Pauline read how, as they watched, the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothing became as bright as a flash of lightning. The story of the Transfiguration of Christ is a story of the transforming power of God in Christ.

As we look at the story of the Transfiguration, we might ask exactly what it is doing in this particular place in the gospel account. Some scholars have speculated that it was really a telling of a post-resurrection appearance of the risen Christ that the gospel writers have chosen to insert here. In this place, it has the effect of giving the disciples, and us, a glimpse of how Jesus' story will unfold – in fact, it gives away the ending. More accurately, perhaps, it clues us in to the fact that the suffering and death that Jesus is beginning to foretell to his disciples will not be the end.

But we hate it when people tell us the ending of a story, don't we? Usually, knowing the ending of something can just spoil the experience for us. There was an amusing ad on television recently where we see an office worker running from his coworkers, ducking into the bathroom when he sees someone coming, or sticking his fingers in his ears and singing loudly when they talk to him. It turns out that he had recorded an episode of the new hot television show the night before, and was trying to avoid having somebody tell him what happened until he could get home and watch it for himself.

In fact, there's a new term in the popular lexicon that's about this very situation. It's the "spoiler alert." It describes a kind of courtesy that one person extends another. You're supposed to announce a "spoiler alert" any time you are about to expose a crucial element of the plot of a movie or television show to someone who may not have seen it.

This is all well and good, but then again, who of us hasn't been guilty of occasionally "sneaking a peek" at the ending when reading a particularly thrilling story? When you do that, everything you've read so far suddenly makes sense. Maybe, you see everything you've read in a totally different way. True, when we do that, we take away the element of surprise. But knowing how it will turn out, we can read more slowly. We can savor the richness of the characters, and comprehend the story more deeply. I think that's the case with the story of Christ's Transfiguration.

It's crucial that we be able to look at the life and ministry of Jesus knowing how the story will turn out. We need to assess them from a post-resurrection perspective, as people who already understand the reality of Easter Sunday. That's because Easter is how we know that Christ is more than another wise teacher. It is the resurrection that keeps the teachings of Jesus from being just one more collection of pithy sayings and self-help suggestions. And that's important because none of this is just about the transforming of Jesus. It is about the transforming of us.

Transforming our lives is something we hear a good deal about nowadays, but in our society most people mean something much more mundane than God does. When we talk about changing our lives we're usually talking about makeovers: a new haircut, a new car, maybe a yoga class at the local gym. The diet and personal improvement books make up the single biggest section in most book stores. We're inundated with advertisements from the state lottery telling us how six little numbers can transform our lives, or from former stock-brokers shilling the latest can't-miss stock picking tips that will make us filthy rich.

Transformation is what we are selling in here, too. But the transformation we're talking about is more like the story of a man who was born in London in 1725. He was the son of a ship's captain, and he went to sea with his father at the age of 11. He eventually became the captain of his own ship, engaged in the lucrative business of trafficking in black slaves. His ship would carry as many as 600 Africans, chained together in the bowels of the ship, lying side by side like so much cord wood. It was common to lose up to a third of the human cargo on any given voyage, and their bodies would simply be tossed overboard. Those fortunate enough to survive the voyage were sold into a life of bitter slavery in the Americas.

While this man had received some religious instruction from his mother, he was not a person with any particular religious convictions. But the seeds of his personal transformation were apparently sown when he read a book he had found on board his ship, *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. And on one particular voyage back to Africa he experienced what he would call his "great deliverance." He recorded in his journal that as he was trying to steer his ship in a violent storm and it seemed to him certain that his ship would sink, he spontaneously cried out, "Lord, have mercy upon us!" He would later reflect on how his ship had made it through when all seemed to be lost, and he came to believe that God had spoken to him through the storm, and that it was God's grace that had saved him.

He would later be ordained in the Anglican Church. His name was John Newton. Perhaps you recognize his name, but you probably would not if it were not for these words, which he composed: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; Was blind, but now I see."

Of course, people get involved in church for a variety of reasons, and transformation isn't necessarily one of them. Personal transformation is probably not what Peter, James, and John thought they were signing up for with Jesus. I'm sure that when Jesus invited them to come with him to the mountaintop they did not go with the expectation that they were going to have their worldviews, or their lives, changed. They probably had no idea why they were going at all. Peter, though, seems to sense that something extraordinary is happening, without having any conception of what it should, or ultimately would, mean to him to be a witness. The only thing he can think of to do is suggest that they build three shelters, really shrines, for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, to commemorate the event.

But Peter has barely gotten the words out when a bright cloud envelopes them, and they hear a voice saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5) They fall to the ground terrified. Who wouldn't? Jesus comes to them, and as your pew Bibles read, says, rather abruptly, "Get up. Don't be afraid." But Jesus isn't ending the experience as matter-of-factly as it appears he is. "Get up" is not a particularly good translation of what Jesus says to the disciples. The verb here is one that means "to raise up," and Matthew uses it in the passive voice. So what Jesus is really literally saying to the disciples who have just heard God's voice is "Don't be afraid. Be raised up."

So, the "bumper sticker" version of the story of the Transfiguration is really the meaning of discipleship in a few easy steps. Believe that Jesus is God. Listen to him. Don't be afraid to be open to his transforming work in your own life. And be raised up.

We don't really see any indication in today's reading of how this startling and unexpected meeting with God changed the disciples. That's because this "raising up," this process of transformation, rarely happens to us in an instant. After his encounter with God at sea, Captain John Newton remained a slave trader for several years before heeding God's call to ministry. Even after their mountaintop experience, James and John would still be bickering about which of them was the greatest next to Jesus. Even Peter didn't get what was going on at the mountaintop. After he came down, he still would go through his doubts and denials. We know from resurrection stories that when he saw the empty tomb, Peter still didn't get it. But Peter, James, and John would ultimately be changed forever, just like John Newton, by their experiences.

Peter would later reflect on the lessons of his mountaintop encounter with God in the letter you heard Pauline read today. Peter wrote beautifully, and, I think,

showed the wisdom of years, when he said, “We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” (2 Peter 1:19)

The story of the Transfiguration is a perfect one for us as we enter the season of Lent, and hopefully engage the journey of reflection and self-examination. Today’s gospel lesson is an invitation to discover the evidence of God’s transforming work in our own lives, and to open ourselves to possibilities we can’t even imagine. It’s a calling to live our lives with the assurance and confidence of people who already know how the story ends. We have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. And if we can pay attention to it and let it be our light in the darkness, it might be some time before the day will dawn. But (spoiler alert!) the day will dawn, and the morning star will rise in our hearts. We will be raised up. Our God will see to it.