

Transformed, Transfigured
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Transfiguration of the Lord
March 3, 2019
Exodus 34:29-35
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 29:28-43

Today is the final Sunday of Epiphany, a season of our liturgical year 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. Each of our lectionary readings has invited us into the question of just who Christ is, and by association, the equally profound question of just who we are. This final Sunday of Epiphany, the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent, is when we retell the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Luke reports how Peter, James and John are taken up on the mountain by Jesus. They are trying to stay awake when suddenly they are dazzled by a change in Jesus' appearance. We read about how "... while [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." (Luke 9:29) Jesus stood with Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Peter, James, and John hear the voice of God speaking from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, the Chosen; listen to him." (Luke 9:35) Jesus is giving the three disciples a look ahead at his true nature, that would be revealed fully in the Resurrection.

The disciples are both puzzled and frightened by what's going on. Peter's reaction is to suggest that they build shrines to Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. No one comments on that, but Luke says simply that Peter didn't know what he was saying. But honestly, I don't think that any of us can really fault the disciples for feeling confused, and a little uneasy, with what they had just witnessed. Let's face it – what's happened is pretty strange. Yet one might expect to find an abnormally high tolerance for strangeness among us followers of Christ. After all, listen to what we claim as our seminal story: God himself was born as a small human baby in a dirty stable in Bethlehem, lived with us and taught us for about 32 years, was brutally murdered on a trumped-up charge of sedition, and rose from the grave three days later. Strange.

As with most of the stories of our faith, we can't really explain the Transfiguration. But if our objective is to understand what happened on the mountaintop, I think we've missed the point. Because our task is not to define Jesus using the lens of our reality. Our task is to see how Jesus is defining us through the lens of God's reality.

So, what I see in this story is an invitation. It's an invitation to follow – to accept Christ's calling to let God's glory shine in us, and to be, ourselves, changed. You hear me say all the time that the whole reason we are here, if we are serious about our faith, is to be made over. The challenge for us is to be open to God's transforming grace. That's one of the points that the Apostle Paul makes in his letter to the Corinthians that you heard today. Listen again: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) All of us who are working to see the face of God in our lives are being transformed into a new image – God's image.

Notice that Paul doesn't say that we are being transfigured. Transfiguration and transformation aren't the same thing. Transfiguration means a change of outward appearance that can be temporary. Transformation is about basic and elemental change that is lasting.

Transforming our lives has always been a hot topic in our society, but usually when we say that, we're talking about something else. We're talking about makeovers. When we want to change our lives, we try a new wardrobe, a new haircut, a new car. The U.S. self-improvement market, including all the books, the motivational speakers, the coaches, and the infomercials is about a \$10 billion a year, and growing at about 6% annually. Advertisers never fail to tell us that whatever it is they're selling will "change our lives."

But we shouldn't be too critical of the secular world here. The church isn't immune to this. We Christians are equally capable of pursuing quick and shallow fixes – confusing transfiguration for transformation. It's easy to put a smiling and welcoming face on a nature that remains controlling, or judgmental, or uncharitable, or unforgiving, or intolerant of certain groups of people whose lifestyles we don't like. That's why both Christians and the Church can have a reputation for hypocrisy that is not undeserved.

To be a disciple is to accept an invitation to become new creations in Christ. It's always timely to remind ourselves of that, but perhaps most so as we prepare for the forty days of Lent. Lent is a time of reflection and self-evaluation, hopefully coupled with a renewed emphasis on some disciplines of the Spirit that can open us to God's work in our lives – work that really is life changing. Here are a few things you can think about.

The simplest suggestion I can give you is, "Pray." Be in contact with God – sharing needs, asking forgiveness, giving thanks, and seeking God's will for your life. Disciples pray for the health and well-being of others, and of their church. Being individual people of God, or the church of God, is impossible unless prayer becomes an integral part of who we are.

Now, if someone were to suggest that you could have rock-hard abs in only 10 minutes a day, you'd think that was a very reasonable investment of time. But 10 minutes of prayer sounds like an eternity. And I'll share a secret with you. The first few times you sit down to pray for 10 minutes, it will be. But if you do it faithfully, you will reach a point where ten will become fifteen, and fifteen, twenty. And you will feel that the day is just not the same if you miss your prayer time.

Author and theologian Frederick Buechner had a wonderful quote about prayer. Here's what he said: "According to Jesus, by far the most important thing about praying is to keep at it... Be importunate, Jesus says -- not, one assumes, because you have to beat a path to God's door before he'll open it, but because until you beat the path maybe there's no way of God getting to your door."

Along with prayer, make time to read the Bible. In one sense, this is becoming harder, as we all get busier. But I will point out that if you are carrying a smart phone everywhere you go, you are also carrying a Bible. If you'd like, I'd be more than happy to add your address to the list of people to whom I email a short passage of scripture every morning. Something to think about.

Worship regularly. If you're not in the habit, perhaps Lent is a time to develop it. Since the very beginnings of the church, the gathering of God's people to hear the Word spoken and sung, and to participate in the Sacraments, has been the means by which we praise our Creator; we are renewed and strengthened by God's gift of grace; and we affirm our shared identity as a family of faith. Disciples do not worship because they are obligated to. They worship in a spirit of joy at the expectation of touching the very source of our being.

Of course, another important spiritual discipline is giving. We may not tend to think of practicing generosity as a way of growing spiritually, but it is. Disciples give. Disciples seek to grow in the grace of giving. I once visited the worship service of a full-gospel church in New Jersey where I witnessed something remarkable. I had never seen it before, nor have I seen it since. When the minister said it was time to present our offerings to God, the congregation applauded. Some people stood and applauded. Imagine people being so happy for the opportunity to give back to God that they would spontaneously applaud the arrival of the collection plate. But that's how disciples give – out of an appreciation for the central place of generosity in a life transformed by God.

One of the most interesting things about our reading from Exodus is that when Moses descended Mount Sinai after talking to God, Moses' face was shining like the sun. The reading says that Moses himself was not even aware that he looked any different than when he went out. But Aaron and the Israelites could see it clearly. You know, it might be that if we resolve to spend more time with God; if we commit ourselves to grow in love; if we are intentional about doing things that open our lives to God's transforming power – like Moses, we might not even notice any change in ourselves. But the world will see it.

All of us were created in God's image. In the story of the Transfiguration, we get a glimpse of the fulfillment of that image, radiant with God's glory. The celebration of the Resurrection we look ahead to gives us the assurance that someday we, too, will be transfigured. But first, we must be transformed. For now, there is a journey for us to make – a 40-day journey that ends at the foot of the cross. And if we commit ourselves at every step, we will not return unchanged.