

Transfiguration?

Matthew 17:1-9

Heather Prince Doss
Sea Island Presbyterian Church
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The Transfiguration of the Lord is another one of those strange Sundays in the life of the church. It comes up every year just before the start of Lent. It is probably not a story that you remember as a crucial turning point in your life of faith. Yet it appears in three of the gospel accounts. Even the story of Jesus' birth only appears in Matthew and Luke. The account of the transfiguration is strange for modern readers to understand and appropriate. It is very supernatural and difficult to reconcile with our scientific worldview. As Christians in the 21st century, why does this unusual and difficult story continue to find its way into calendar of important church days? Just because it always has? Or should the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke give so much attention to this story mean that perhaps it still has life for us today?

Let us start with the word "transfiguration." Just by show of hands, how many of you have used that word in conversation in the last month? Hmm, no one – not even your preacher. I have to admit that I am a little skeptical of these "church words" that have no meaning outside of the church. The Greek word translated "transfiguration" is actually a little more familiar; it is the root for the English word "metamorphosis." Still not a word in your everyday vernacular? I think "transformation" is probably an okay fit, too. I think it is a safe starting point to say that we should at least know what the word "transfiguration" means. Now let us move on to understanding the event described in the Gospel.

To understand the Transfiguration, it is helpful to get to know Jesus' disciples a bit and to know what happens before and after this story. Jesus' first disciples, of course, were Jewish and they had some very traditional ideas about what kind of Messiah they were waiting on. The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus probably did not surprise them too much, since they expected the Messiah to be a lot like Moses – someone who would overthrow evildoers and deliver Israel from the heavy hand of Rome. So, for the first disciples, the vision of the transfiguration would have seemed miraculous, but the vision would have affirmed what they were already thinking and hoping – that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah.

Now let us think for a moment about the context of the transfiguration in Matthew's gospel. Do you remember that the first phrase in our reading this morning was "After six days. . ."? Six days after what? Before the account of the transfiguration is another important and more memorable story about a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples give a few different answers – very traditional Jewish answers – when suddenly Jesus makes things a bit more personal: "But who do you say that I am?" And in a moment of clarity and truth, Peter speaks up, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:13-17). I can almost feel with Peter the excitement of this confession. The thing you most hoped for, the thing your people have longed for ages is standing before you. To touch it and taste it and name it – what excitement!

So in today's reading, when Peter stood on the mountaintop with Jesus and saw Jesus' face shining like the sun, the same way that Moses' face shone like the sun when he went up Mt. Sinai to talk with God – Peter must have been awestruck. The scene is mysterious and awe-inspiring anyway. But to also know that you are witnessing what the generations have been waiting for – to see clearly that you are in the presence of the glory of the Lord – what wonder and fear! One ancient thinker writes that it was not only Jesus who was transformed, but also senses of Peter, James, and John who were able to perceive the divine nature of Christ.¹

And this is at least part of what the transfiguration means for us. It means experience Christ, as he really is, in all of his glory. It is to have our senses transformed by Christ so that we see ordinary things differently. It is that mountaintop experience where suddenly you know and understand. In this sense it is something like Epiphany – an aha! moment. You have had them before in your personal life - a moment when the solution to whatever problem you've been having suddenly comes to light. Sometimes this happens in our relationships – when we suddenly understand someone who we know or love. We've also had these moments in our faith journey where some experience opened our eyes to the true nature of God's love or forgiveness or plan for our lives. Having our senses transformed so that we see God's truth clearly is part of transfiguration.

But we cannot leave our understanding of transfiguration there, because transfiguration also has meaning for the times in life when we are not standing on the mountaintop. You see, in those six days between Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah and the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain, there is something else that happens. Between Peter's confession and the transfiguration, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that his mission is to “undergo great suffering . . . be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matthew 16:21). The idea of a Messiah who would be killed is such an assault on Peter's sense of right and wrong, that Peter declares, “God forbid!”

The transfiguration is not just about a glorified, shining, divine Jesus. The transfiguration is about showing that the glorious, shining, divine Jesus is the same Jesus who will suffer and die for the sake of all creation. In the transfiguration, Peter's ideas about his Lord are both confirmed and far surpassed and transformed. Yes, Jesus is the one who will save. But he will not do it by conquering. He will do it by submitting. He will do it by suffering.

To know Jesus, to really know Jesus, is not only to know those mountain-top highs of faith and life. It is also to know suffering. Is Jesus, in his divine glory and power, made known on the mountaintops of life? To be certain. But to really know Jesus – all of Jesus – we must also walk in the valley of suffering in which Jesus himself walked. If we worship a savior who has not suffered, we do not worship Jesus. If we follow some lord, but he does not lead us to the places of suffering in the world, then we have not followed Jesus.

The Savior, our Savior, is the one who, in all his divine glory, walked down from the mountain top and set his face toward Jerusalem. It may be on the mountain tops of life where we experience the transcendent wonder of Christ. It is in the valleys of life that we walk side by side

¹ Maximus the Confessor. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_of_Jesus>

with the Son of God who descended to human form and “became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

It is not Christ’s magnificent and mysterious glory which shall cause every knee to bend and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord. It is in the knowledge that the powerful and wonderful ruler of the universe suffered for our sake.

If you stand on the mountain top this morning – basking in the glory of the Lord – may the light of his face fill you with awe. But do not build you home on the mountain top. Turn with Christ to the places of suffering in the world. Go with Christ to people who suffer, and go in the knowledge that in so doing you might be called to suffer for the sake of others. Go with the power of the Holy Spirit to be a transforming force, transfiguring the valley of the shadow of death into the valley of the shadow of life.

And if you find yourself in the valley, know that when we suffer, whether it be for our commitment to the gospel or because the storms of life beat upon our little ship, we can be confident that our Savior accompanies us in our suffering. It is in the dark and difficult moments that we best understand Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. It is in the dark and difficult moments we are most likely to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. It is in the dark and difficult moments when we learn the meaning of service and sacrifice.

This is not to say that God desires our suffering or that God causes it. It is to say that we need not fear the darkness, for it is in the darkness that the mysterious light of Christ is revealed. It is in the darkness that we are transformed. It is in the darkness that we are equipped to know, understand, and celebrate the wonder of Christ’s shining face.

May the glory of the Lord fill you this Transfiguration Sunday, transforming you on your mountaintops and in your valleys, and sending you out to be a transforming force in the world. Amen.