

Transfiguration: Jesus', Ours, The World's.

Matthew 17:1-9

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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Today is Transfiguration Sunday! This text is preached all over the world on this last Sunday of the season of Epiphany and the Sunday before the beginning of Lent. The Transfiguration! Epiphany of Epiphanies.

The Irish writer, James Joyce, described “epiphany” this way: *A sudden, unexpected moment of illumination, a revelation of the radiance of the ordinary world.* Yes! That’s it! Suddenly our minds are illumined; suddenly we see the radiance of the world God has made. A light bulb comes on in our minds; we see the whole world lit.

Transfiguration is one of the twelve major festivals in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Among their icons they use for worship and prayer, the icon of the Transfiguration of Jesus is up there among the most painted and revered: Jesus, Mary and Child, Mary, and this one, the Transfiguration. Maybe they are onto something. I think they are.

So this day, let’s ponder the Transfiguration: Jesus', Ours, and the World's.

I

It happened on a mountain, as many experiences of God in scripture. Jesus had taken his three main disciples, the inner circle, Peter, James and John up the mountain with him. He wanted these three with him at the most important moments of his ministry, the raising of Jairus' daughter from death, for example, and in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed his agonized prayers the night before his death.

Then it happened, Jesus transfigured. His face shone like the sun, his body became a body of light. He was changed—the Greek word is metamorphosis—changed before their startled eyes.

II

Next came the Divine Summit Meeting! Moses and Elijah suddenly joined him, and they began to talk together. There's a conversation I would love to have overheard!

The scene is full of meanings. Moses and Elijah stood for the heart of Hebrew scripture: Moses the Torah, the Law; Elijah, the Prophets. Together they represented the fulness of God's revelation to the Jewish people. So here, on the mountain, past revelation and new revelation, all joined in this moment of divine glory.

Remember when Moses went up Sinai and God gave to him the Ten Commandments? And when he came down the mountain his face shone as the sun?

Remember Elijah fleeing the murderous rage of Queen Jezebel, climbing up that same mountain seeking the presence of God? Then came earthquake, wind and fire, as at Moses' encounter with God on Sinai, but the Lord was not in them! It may have been a terrifying moment. Was he now alone? Then there was as we have heard it translated, "a still small voice." It's almost become a cliché. A better translation: "a crushed silence", the sound of utter silence. And now the Lord was there. And Elijah covered his face with his cloak.

So here we are! Jesus transfigured, shining like the sun, and Moses and Elijah transported from the heavenly realm to talk with him and he with them.

III

Now here comes Peter, impulsive, excitable Peter breaking into the holy moment with words, rushing in, as the saying goes, where angels fear to tread. "Lord, this is so amazing! If you want I'll build three huts up here, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for you. Then whenever we want or need to we can come up here and be with you!"

We can forgive Peter his enthusiasm. Don't we all wish to capture central moments in our lives! Spiritual moments, moments of inexpressible love. But God cannot be captured, held in a place. No temple can contain God, though we try!

The Bible tells us over and over that God's presence is an "elusive presence".¹ We cannot hold on to it. Remember Mary in the garden on Resurrection morning? When she finally recognized him and rushed to him, Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me. I am on my way to the Father." Or that Easter Sunday evening in a room in Emmaus when Jesus sat at table with two disciples, who as of yet had not recognized him. Then he took the bread and blessed it and broke it, and they suddenly knew who he was! And just as suddenly he vanished from their sight.

We want to domesticate God, turn him into a house-god or church-god where we can keep him for ourselves. But God cannot be contained in a temple, a theology, a tradition. In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan the Lion is the Christ figure. One character asks another when they approach Aslan, "Is he safe?" The other said, "Yes, he is safe, but he is not tame!" So with the God of the Bible.

While Peter was talking, God decided to enter the conversation. A “bright cloud” overshadowed them! Can you imagine a bright cloud—then it suddenly taking over the sky? Then from the Cloud came a Voice:

This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!

Jesus had heard these words from God at his baptism. Now God is revealing this truth to Peter, James and John. They would need these words in the days ahead, this revelation of Jesus’ divine identity and mission as things grew worse.

God says, “Listen to him”, hear him, attend to him; He is the Way, the Truth, the Life.

The disciples fell on their faces in fear. And Jesus came over to them and touched them and lifted them up and said, “Rise, have no fear.” That may be the word you most need to hear this day, or any day when life has overwhelmed you, frightened you. “Rise, do not be afraid”.

And when the disciples looked up the Cloud was gone, Moses and Elijah were gone. All they saw was Jesus in his ordinary, everyday flesh. Then they walked down the mountain together. And soon Jesus would turn his face toward Jerusalem and the cross. And this vision would keep them going through the horrors of his death, until Resurrection morning.

Jesus' Transfiguration! Now I want to talk about ours. For that is where we are headed in God's intention for us: toward our own transfiguration.

Here is how Paul put it:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. (II Corinthians 3:18)

Can we begin to believe this? I do. I see it on your faces sometimes, the love of Christ shining in your faces. I see it when you yourself may not be able to see it. It doesn't happen all the time, of course, but sometimes. And it is because we keep him in mind, his words in mind, his way in mind.

We become what we behold!

Nathaniel Hawthorne in his short story, "The Great Stone Face", tells of a village towered over by whose stone cliff bore the resemblance of a man's face, noble in features which gave to the villagers a sense of blessedness and well-being. (Every time I climb the Profile Trail up Grandfather Mountain and glimpse the profile of a man's face nature has etched there, I think of this story.)

The story tells of Ernest who from young boyhood was fascinated by the face on the mountain. Across the years the villagers had passed down a legend that one day a child would be born whose likeness matched that of the

mountain's face. When strangers came into town the villagers would look to see if this was the man. But no.

Ernest had studied the face and gazed upon it his whole life. Then one day, as he was talking to some of the villagers, they looked at the mountain, then looked at him and exclaimed: "Behold! Behold! Ernest is himself the likeness of the Great Stone Face."²

Such is the mystery of the church and of the Christian life: As we behold the Christ, little by little, degree by degree, not all at once, we are being changed into his likeness.

Dare we believe that this can happen to our *church*, happen to *us*? That despite all the odds and evidence sometimes to the contrary, as we follow him and "put him on" as Paul put it, we can become more and more like him? That,

...we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.

We all! Are being changed!

IV

You probably know that one of my spiritual heroes is Thomas Merton who became America's most famous monk as he lived out his calling at the Abbey of Gethsemane in central Kentucky. One day he experienced an epiphany, a

transfiguration that changed him and changed the way he saw everything, and everyone. Here are his words:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth Street and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers....I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate....now I realize what we really are. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of convincing people that they are walking around shining like the sun.³

This is who we are! *In Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda pokes his skin and says to Luke: “Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter”. This is what we see when “the eyes of our eyes are opened.” It is what the mystics call a “unitive experience”—when we are one with all life.

I think the reason Eastern Orthodox make the Transfiguration so central: because it’s not only about Jesus; it’s about *us* too!

VII

This transfiguration is Jesus’ and it is ours, and it is of the world itself when our eyes are opened.

Have you ever gazed out on a field you have passed a hundred times, but this time it was transfigured in the beauty of God? The wet grasses gleaming in the sun light. Or a sunset over the sea lighting the sky with color after glorious color. Or you come around a bend in the mountain path and suddenly see a meadow resplendent with wild flowers in bloom? And you thought, this is God's world! Not mine, God's.

Sometimes in the moment of transfiguration we are given new eyes to see a world rinsed clean, recreated, restored, the world as God has meant it to be from the beginning. The poet John Muir saw such in his poem "Transfiguration":

So from the ground we felt that virtue branch
 Through all our veins till we were whole, our wrists
 As fresh and pure as water from a well,
 Our hands made new to handle holy things
 The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed
 Till earth and light and water entering there
 Gave back to us the clear unfallen world....
 Was this a vision [he asks]?
 Or the one glory of the everlasting world.
 Perpetually at work?...

Glory, I say! Glory to God! Glory to the world! And Glory to you, beautiful, beloved children of God.

1. See Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a new Biblical Theology* (N.Y. Harper and Row, 1978).
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (N.Y.: Image Books, 1968), pp.156-7.