

Transfiguration Sermon - Luke 9:28-36

Today we celebrate the transfiguration of Jesus – an account of which we just read from the Gospel of Luke. Do you try to imagine what that would look like? Do you find yourselves, like me, a little jealous of an encounter with something that seems so miraculous? Through the transfiguration, the divinity of Jesus is made undeniably clear to Peter, James, and John. In the midst of their sleepiness they see the changing of Jesus' face during prayer. The face is both familiar and unfamiliar – recognizable as the man they know so well and yet shining with glory. Even his clothes become dazzlingly white. Jesus allows his followers to see his full divinity with sudden brilliance and clarity.

Strangely, two others are present: Moses, associated with the law, and Elijah, one of the most important prophets – the one who was supposed to come again in advance of the Messiah. Their presence also points to his divinity, as if to say, "This is the one proclaimed and anticipated throughout scripture. As important as our scripture is, here is God standing before you, a God that has been faithful in the past and is faithful now as he makes possible a new future." It must have been an incredible scene.

So, what do you do with this story? How does it have meaning in your own life?

I have come to believe that the transfiguration was not a one-time event, at least, not in the sense of it being a moment in which the divinity of God is revealed in a way that feels undeniable. Transfiguration happens, I think, multiple times in our lives. They are moments, both subtle and dramatic, which suddenly break open the known world and reveal an unexpected presence of glory. The givens of life, the cold hard facts, and all our assumptions about how things work show themselves to be incomplete. The kingdom of our own making trembles and shakes, revealing fissures through which we capture a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven and come to see God in a way we cannot shake. God becomes real in a way that we did not understand before; or, with some moments of transfiguration, we come to understand something about God we did not see before.

Our moments may not happen on a mountain top, or involve dead spiritual leaders, but they are significant, nonetheless. Our moments of experiencing the transfiguration may come while we sit in the car waiting for our daughter to be released from soccer practice. Or while watching a play. Or while on a retreat. It may come while we are on a pilgrimage, when we visit some place we've read about in scripture and suddenly we are visited by something we can't quite explain. It may come while we are grieving and least expecting any sign of joy. One moment we are going about our business, and another we simply know that we have seen God.

Some people I know have experienced this during prayer, others have spoken of encountering God while serving someone else, and many from time to time have such experiences in, of all places, church.

I had such an experience years ago while serving communion. It was just an ordinary Sunday. I don't recall any grand buildup of any sort. I was likely feeling particularly tired and worn out from a busy schedule and too much to do. I hadn't arrived that Sunday with an anticipation of meeting God.

Nevertheless, after serving wine to a large number of people I leaned down to offer the cup to the mother of a boy about four years old named Jack, and to utter the familiar words, "The blood of Christ; the cup of salvation." I'd already said those words many times that morning, but just as I was about to pronounce them one more time, it was like a lightning bolt struck me. Jack asked me, "What's in there?" Jack wanted to know why he could not have some of what his mother was about to receive. I looked at the cup and I suddenly came to see what an extraordinary thing it was that I held in my hands. I leaned over and showed the wine inside the cup to him."

Interesting in that moment, what had been a mere theological concept for me became, a very present reality. God revealed himself through the face of a child on that morning at that Holy meal. It was pretty awesome. I saw God. Annie Dillard has written:

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

That morning as I leaned over with the cup, I felt a sudden need for a crash helmet; I felt drawn into a place from which I might never return – and in truth, I kind of didn't want to.

When we experience a moment of transfiguration we may wish, as Peter did, to refuse to move. In the face of glory, we may wish to build a house that can contain that glory and protect us from losing sight of what we have just seen. We want to stay on the mountain top with its fresh assurances and resist a return down to the valley where all those distractions of life are.

But we are called to live within the realm of the already and the not yet. The transfiguration moments, the moments when we see God freshly, help us to see that it is not God who has been sleeping, but us. And so, we move from the holy moment

back into wakefulness. Back into the relationships that surround us and the work of making the kingdom of heaven more present within our homes, our workplaces, our city, and our ever-expanding global village. The Lutheran tradition allows us to practice this spiritual journey each Sunday morning.

We come to church; we take our places in a pew. We hear the voices of the law, the prophets, the psalmist, and the apostles. And then someone reads the gospel and jumps off the pages. We spiritually remember for a moment the incarnation as we listen to the gospel. Then the gospel appears to retreat and we are given space to interpret how that applies to us today. We pray for others and for ourselves. We give from our resources. We watch as the bread is once again broken, and the wine poured out, remembering Christ's death and resurrection.

And then, we move from where we are. We step out of our places and move toward the Eucharist, the Table, receiving what God has for us. We take it in. And then we return again to the place we left. But perhaps we do not return unchanged.

In the encounter with God, we can be changed in some way that makes the week ahead of us full of new possibilities. And so, we leave our pew and re-enter our homes, our jobs, our schools, our church meetings. We look into the faces of the people in our lives, and we look for new possibilities there too.

That is the other thing I want to say about transfiguration. It happened with Jesus on a mountain and those around him saw his divinity in a way they could not deny. And the voice of God spoke and said, "This my son, my Chosen, listen to him!" Other versions say, "This is my son, my Beloved, with him I am well pleased." The disciples saw his glory and heard God's words of affirmation and love. Moses was also transfigured. Our Old Testament reading talks about the strange shining of his face after his time spent in the presence of God.

What if we also are intended for transfiguration? (*pause*) What if these stories of physical transfiguration point to a spiritual reality we are all meant to embody, and to witness in each other? If we are designed to bear the image of God in this world, then the more we step into truly living as the person we were created to be, the more that image will shine with undeniable radiance.

Have you considered your own face lately? Does it shine with a knowledge that you are loved? Are you able to hear the voice of God saying about you, "This is my Son, my beloved. This is my daughter, my beloved."

How has the knowledge that you are truly loved transfigured you over the last few years?

How has it transfigured the faces of those around you? Amen.