

**“A Glory That Transfigures You and Me”  
Matthew 17:1-9, 14-21**

If you're the New York Giants or the New England Patriots or their fans, today is Super Sunday. If you're Barak, Hillary, John, Mike, Mitt or Ron, Super Tuesday is just around the corner. If you're Peter, James and John, three of Jesus' disciples, today is super ... well, super is a totally inadequate word to describe their mountain top experience.

A Transfiguration? Go figure! It's a strange story. Scholars have a heyday with it. Is it historical? Did it really happen that way? Or is it just a story to parallel an oft repeated pattern in the Bible? Moses had a mountaintop experience of God. So did Elijah. So have others.

Transfiguration isn't a word we use every day. It's a translation of the Greek word, *metamorphoo*. Can you not hear *metamorphosis* and *morph*? *Morph* is a word that connects with us in our computer-graphic age. Even young children know all it. Our grandsons' favorite toys are Transformers, *transmorphers*, if you will. What looks innocently enough like a car or truck can suddenly unfold into a sinister looking robot to save the world, or destroy it.

I certainly don't think Jesus was morphed into some kind of Optimus Prime, but he was morphed in some way before Peter, James and John. In an inexplicable way he became light – the same light that separated day from night on the first day of creation and the same light that pierced the darkest dark on Easter, the eighth day of creation. Jesus, himself, wasn't changed. **“This is my Son, the Beloved.”** Jesus heard those words at his baptism.<sup>1</sup> He's still the same, but his outward appearance became radiant.

Coming to the Lord's Table today reminds me that such a description is the exact opposite of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation which tries to explain the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. The *accidents*, or the outward form of bread and wine, are not morphed, says the doctrine, but the very substance or essence is, so that the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ.

Most Protestants have never embraced such thinking. Nothing is morphed in the Sacrament – neither the outward appearance or the substance of the elements. Bread is bread and juice is juice! In recent years we have alternated the ways we celebrate the Lord's Supper – with congregants moving forward and dipping bread into the juice or with the congregants remaining in their pews while the elements are served to them. I have come to prefer your coming forward for many reasons, not the least of which is the very personal privilege I have as a pastor to look each one of you in the eye and say the body and blood of Christ for you. But there is much to be said about the traditional Presbyterian way which we will use today. Communion is not just about me and thee! It's about all of us at table with Christ and one another. The symbolism that is lost in coming forward is that of being served and then serving one another in turn. That symbol is not lost when you hand the trays of bread and juice to your neighbor. There's a well-known quote by Nikolai Berdyaev, a Christian existentialist from early in the last century, that says it all – “To eat bread is a physical act; to break bread and share it with another is a spiritual act.”

I've digressed a bit, I admit, but then, maybe not. Peter cherished the intimate moment with Jesus, so much so that he wanted to built shrines to preserve the experience. Jesus, however, had his eyes set on the bottom of the mountain where there was ministry to do. You don't need a mountain top experience to be in the presence of Jesus and to be about his business. In fact, the presence of Christ is never more real than in the everyday common acts of ministry.

I must confess that I used to be jealous when I read the story of the Transfiguration. When I read stories in the Bible, I try to find myself in them. In this story, I'm no where to be found. Not until I read the following story do I see myself. There I am at the bottom of the mountain with Bartholomew, James, son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon, the Cananean. Our names barely make it into the scriptures, nor are they found in biographies on the best-seller list at Barnes and Nobel. But there *we* are, frustrated in ministry, embarrassed by failure. Why couldn't we heal a little boy? Jesus blamed it on our lack of faith.

Lack of faith? "Did it ever occur to you, Lord, that if you expanded your inner circle and took all of us up the mountain with you and made this private epiphany a more public manifestation of your glory, that we would have sufficient faith?"

Umpteen years ago Oral Roberts said he had a vision of Jesus that stood 900 feet tall. He raised a lot of money as a result. I remember thinking at the time, "Lord, if I could have just one truly transcendent experience of your glory, I could do all sorts of great things for your church. If I could see just a glimmer of the light Paul saw on that Damascus road, I would be a better pastor, able to preach more powerful sermons, inspire more faithfulness in your people." The answer I always receive is, "You don't need to super-size faith, all you need is a tiny bit of faith, the size of a mustard seed, and you'll do wonders!"

Like it or not, mountaintop experiences are not the norm. They seem to be reserved for the few. Most of us have to content ourselves at the foot of the mountain, wondering what's going on up there, looking through that glass darkly. If we believe anything at all, it is not because we have seen with our own eyes. It is only because faith has been quietly given to us by one who is ever beyond our grasp. That's really not so bad! **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe,"** said our Lord.<sup>ii</sup>

In spite of their being in the inner circle of their Lord that day Peter, John and James turn out no better and no worse than the rest of us. We'll soon learn Peter still misunderstands Jesus. He'll continue to stick his foot in his mouth, speaking when he should listen. James and John will still jockey for positions of honor and privilege in the Kingdom. Perhaps their being privy to this experience only fed their delusions of grandeur. When it really counts, when the cross is set on Calvary, they run away with the rest of us. It is as if they saw nothing!

The great experience did not do for them what we hope similar experiences might do for us. They didn't become more authentic disciples. They didn't develop more faith, nor were they more faithful. They didn't understand and they weren't changed by it all. That's the sad note in this story.

What's important in this story is not our lament that we were outside the loop and can't see ourselves on the mountain with Peter, John and James. What's important is that

is that we listen to Jesus. **“This is my Son, the Beloved ... listen to him.”** Listen to him and do what he says.

Listen to him, when he says to love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves.

Listen to him when he redefines neighbor in the broadest of possible terms and even suggests that our enemy is our neighbor.

Listen to him when he says that true greatness is found not in being number one but in being last of all and servant of all.

Listen to him when he says you can't serve both God and money, nor can you make tomorrow any better by worrying about it. You only make it worse.

Listen to him when he says that he is so close to those in need that anything done in their behalf is actually something being done to him.

Listen to him when he says that those who seek to save their own life will lose it, but that those who are willing to lose their life for the sake of the gospel will find it.

Listen to him when he says **“I am Resurrection and Life!”**<sup>iii</sup>

The Transfiguration is to be lived. All too often, however, our vision for life, our values, and our behavior are not much different than our neighbors who never brighten the doors of our churches.

St. Paul entreats us, **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”**<sup>iv</sup> The Greek word translated as *transformed* is also *metamorphoo* – *transfigure!*

What matters more than our experience of Jesus is his experience of us. What matters more than seeing a great vision is to live by Jesus' vision for human life. What matters more than Jesus' transfiguration is our transfiguration. Maybe that's what Julia Ward Howe meant by her familiar words: *In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.* His glory will transfigure us, but only when we listen to him and take him at his word.

#### Endnotes

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i. See Matthew 3:17 and Luke 3:22

ii. John 20:29

iii. John 11

iv. Romans 12:2