

Transfiguration, Matthew 17:1-9; Last Sunday after the Epiphany

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

This is a challenging Gospel reading for me to preach on. Most of us are very much products of Western modernity, and if we cannot measure it, taste it or feel it, we're inclined to say, its not real. Jesus' transfiguration, or metamorphosis, just seems strange to us, a fairy tale from the pre-modern era. That, frankly, was my mind-set when Diane and I visited Mt. Tabor as one of the first stops on our trip to Palestine with our Bishop about 6 years ago.

Mt Tabor sits by itself, a very dramatic, symmetrical dome, the summit of which is about 1800 feet above the plain in which it is situated. (That's about 1 ½ times as high as our Mt Erie.) There is a road, one hairpin turn after another, leading to the top of Mt. Tabor, where you find two Churches of the Transfiguration, one Greek Orthodox and the other Roman Catholic. The 360 degree view, which includes the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan river valley, is stunning.

Our Gospel reading, however, does not identify the site of the Transfiguration except to say it occurred on a high mountain, and there are three mountains competing for recognition as the site of Jesus transfiguration.

Moses also went up a high mountain, as we heard in Erin's reading from Exodus. Moses going up on a mountain foreshadows the future liturgical movements of the priests on high holy days who enter the tabernacle on the mountain in Jerusalem. Moses first hears God and then sees God's glory. This moment for Moses does not represent the final breaking away from human limitations and sin, but does represent a new moment of God's accessibility to human kind. The revelation of God to Moses on the mountain is a transfiguration, a moment in which the appearance of things is changed in an important way.

Even those among us who are especially open to mystery, may feel uneasy in the presence of texts like these. We wonder whether the fact that all three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, included a story of Jesus' transfiguration was an attempt to beef up Jesus' Hebrew credentials by making his experience on the mountain top even more impressive than the experience of Moses. The fact that all three of the synoptic Gospels include an account of the transfiguration suggests all of the writers saw the transfiguration as important. The similarity of the three accounts suggests a common source.

I think we all have experienced transformations. Who among us, for example, has not known moments of surprising illumination when, through some seemingly ordinary act, episode, or fragment of conversation, someone we thought we knew well is revealed in an entirely new light. Or, after a close friend or family member's death, we realize over time how inadequately, or perhaps wrongly, we had understood the real character of that person. The discovery of the true character of a person, their transformation in your eyes, usually requires a significant lapse of time for contemplation. Perhaps that is why Jesus instructed the three disciples who witnessed the transformation, not to tell anyone. But when it happens, we never see the person as we once did.

I going to share a personal transformation experience. I had a great aunt named Grace. My mother was her only niece, and Aunt Grace, during my growing up years, always lived near us. She would often stop by on Friday nights when we had popcorn or fudge, and my mother would invite her for Sunday dinner each week.

Aunt Grace was the oldest daughter of eight children born in a sod house on the north Dakota prairie in 1895. Yet she managed to become a registered nurse, and then earned a graduate degree in public health nursing, serving for many years as the public health nurse for eastern Snohomish County. She made sure we were the first kids in the County to get polio shots when they became available in the 1950's, telling us to roll up our sleeve and not wiggle.

She never married. She introduced my brother to the idea of becoming a doctor and she was there when he got his medical degree. My two sisters would spend weekend nights at her house. She took us on a road trip to Disneyland.

Many years after her death, I began to realize she was so much more than an old maid aunt we could take for granted. As my understanding of the term “the grace of God” developed, I knew “grace” was an important word, as well as a name. I now see that she was an exceptionally thoughtful, generous person, a blessing in our lives, indeed, God’s gracious, gay, gift to our family. To me Aunt Grace has been transformed.

With respect to Jesus, the Disciples in their time, and we today, are challenged to confront the great question of the New Testament, the question Jesus put to his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Or, as stated by the great Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” Is Jesus the Christ of history that we read about and study, or the Christ of faith that shapes our lives each day? Or perhaps both? Indeed, isn’t this exactly what the account of Jesus’ transfiguration would have us affirm?

The account of the transfiguration of Jesus is not intended to transport us into a mystical realm. Rather, the transfiguration account is written for us to see that these followers of Jesus, these untutored, down-to-earth men and women, left everything to follow Jesus, hardly knowing why. Over time they came to know that they had been drawn to him, not just because of his obvious humanity, but more importantly, because Jesus radiated and spoke of ineffable and eternal truth. They came to see Jesus as the decisive representation of the divine, the source and judge of life. As one blurted out: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Lest we get carried away, however, after the disciple Peter gave this answer, he went on to propose an agenda for faith that earned Jesus’ harshest rebuke, “Get behind me Satan!” And the three disciples who felt they had been specially elected to witness Christ’s transfiguration, proposed that edifices be erected to commemorate the occasion. They had to be reminded that it was Jesus’ way, to which they must be conformed. They were not to go running around saying, ‘Guess what I saw today.’ True discipleship means taking up the cross and following Jesus, not building churches.

We are challenged to confess by word and deed that Jesus is indeed the Christ. But we are at the same time warned against using that confession to justify a triumphalist religion. The Christ of faith must always lead us back to the Jesus of history, to the one who was crucified and rose from the dead, the Christ who healed the sick, welcomed the stranger, and calls us to do the same.

In our Gospel reading, when the three disciples heard the voice from heaven, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

So it is for us. We too stumble, blurt out the first thought that comes to mind, and fail to recognize Jesus’ calling for us.

But then Jesus touches us and says, do not fear, and calls us again.

Amen. May it ever be so.

Dale Ramerman
Christ Episcopal Church, Anacortes
February 23, 2020