

TRANSFIGURATION: JESUS' AND OURS

Sermon preached by the Rev. Titus Presler, Th.D., D.D.,
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in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd, General Theological Seminary, 20 February 2007
Year C, Last Epiphany: 1 Kings 19.9-18; 2 Peter 1.16-19 (20-21); Mark 9.2-9

*"O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the
holy mountain:*

*Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance,
may be strengthened to bear our cross,
and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*

Christology – our view of the nature of the Christ event,
and our view of the nature of Jesus the Christ –
affects deeply and decisively how we experience the story of Jesus being
transfigured.

And conversely our reading of this story may affect our Christology.

Before the passion, says the collect:

*"O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory
upon the holy mountain . . ."*

"Before the passion" – which is to say,
from a place of anguish, fear and dread –
at least, that's my claim.

We know from the whole run of the gospel narrative
both that the religious and political opposition to Jesus was intensifying and
turning dangerous,
and that Jesus was aware of it, for he began to predict the pernicious turn that the
opposition could take.

Think of times of dread in your own life –
a potentially malignant prognosis for yourself or a loved one,
the impending breakup of a central relationship,
an apparently intractable conflict at work freighted with your possibly losing out,
a financial catastrophe or the threat of one –
my guess is that most or all of us have had some such brush with dread.

For Jesus, one who counseled others to read the signs of the times,
the signs of what was happening around him pointed at least to a major
confrontation if he continued on course
and possibly to the kind of Roman torture and death that people could see on lots
of weekends and other random days outside Jerusalem's city walls.

Disfigurement seemed imminent.

**This situational crux helps us with the question *Why?* –
why was Jesus transfigured?**

A lot of reflection on the transfiguration assumes that Jesus was transfigured for the benefit of the disciples and us:
 the disciples needed to see Jesus' glory so that they could tumble to his divine identity,
 and ditto for us.

No, I say, Jesus was transfigured because *he* needed to be transfigured.

Let me put the *emphasis* differently:

Jesus was transfigured because he *needed* to be transfigured.
 He'd gone into ministry on the strength of a hunch and a revelation –
 – the hunch he'd doubtless had growing up,
 of which we hear one boyhood vignette in Luke
 – and the revelation he'd received at his baptism –
 "You are my only Son, in whom I am well pleased" –
 a proclamation which in bringing together the binding of Isaac in Genesis with the
 Suffering Servant of Isaiah 42
 gave Jesus a sense of who he was and what he was to do.

A lot had happened since then –

 God working miracles through him,
 great crowds gathering with their reassuring adulation,
 but also persistent and virulent opposition.

Jesus felt called to face that –

 but was he really?
 and was he really who he said he was?
 and was his sense of vocation a mission or a mirage?

**Luke is the gospel of women, tears, the Holy Spirit and prayer,
 and it is in that spirit of prayer that Luke tells us that Jesus went up on the
 mountain to *pray* –**

 which is to say, to be with God,
 to pour out before God all this fear and loathing on the campaign trail
 and see what God might do with it.

And he didn't want to pray alone: he needed and wanted his support group with him,
 the inner circle of his inner circle –
 never mind that they dozed off: he needed them to be there.

Let me revise my earlier statement:

 it's not so much that Jesus needed to be *transfigured* in particular,
 rather in this crisis Jesus needed *God* –
 God's closeness, God's centeredness,
 God's holding and upholding.

It was in the vulnerability of *prayer* that the glory could shine forth,
 it was in the receptivity of *prayer* that two praying mountain men, Moses and
 Elijah, could put in an encouraging appearance,
 it was in *prayer* that Jesus was transfigured.

**And he needed it all, needed it desperately.
 A needy Jesus.**

That's where Christology makes a difference.

If Jesus had no needs,

if Jesus always knew just what was going to happen,

and had it all figured out

and whose only obstacle was how the disciples just couldn't get it –

that would be a Jesus who might reassure someone but certainly not me.

The Jesus I think I know is a Jesus who has walked through all the quandaries I face and

worse,

who has faced all the dilemmas I know and worse,

who has known all my dreads and worse.

Obviously that makes a difference on the side of solidarity with our suffering.

Equally, though, it makes a difference on the side of glory –

and by glory I mean the showing forth of the very presence of God:

that's what made Moses' face shine,

that's what made Jesus glisten in the whole of his being –

the showing forth of the very presence and being of God in the world.

We Anglicans, and especially we Episcopalians, are truly great at showing forth glory in

liturgy,

but we tend to be hesitant about affirming glory theologically and devotionally.

I think it was on this occasion here last year that John Koenig shared a remarkable fact:

that in his nearly 30 years of service on the Admissions Committee of this

seminary

he estimated that in his personal conversations with applicants, something over

half the applicants testified to some direct visual or auditory experience

from God at the heart of their call to ministry.

Yet how often do we hear such testaments of glory? – not very.

Glory is suspect these days.

For every person rejoicing in some special experience of God's presence and grace,

there's a clot of scoffers who say it cannot have been so.

Even we Christians can be so stuck in a humdrum faith

that we become proud of it as "down to earth;"

we reject or marginalize reports of others' grace

and close ourselves off to God's glory in our own lives.

In one of the tiredest homiletic tropes, even the story of Jesus' transfiguration is often

taken mainly as warning that "you can't stay on the mountaintop forever."

That's true, but that's not the point of the story.

Maybe if we can realize that the glory on the mountain was not some gratuitous sound

and light show confected from wild imaginings and intended just to dazzle

you and me and Inner Three,

if we can tumble to the possibility that this was a transfiguration granted to a

friend of ours who was in agony and dread,

a transfiguration gracing a mystic journey in prayer –

Maybe if we can realize that the anguish that took Jesus to the mountain was an anguish

that signifies Jesus' solidarity with us in all we suffer,

then maybe we can receive with open hands the possibility that Jesus also offers us solidarity with him in his glory.
 Maybe if we can accept that Jesus *needed* the gift of glory,
 then maybe we can acknowledge our own need and longing for that glory that is the showing forth of the very being and presence of God in our lives.

Glory is a longing of the human spirit.

You see it in lots of small ways.

Fairy tales are full of people being transfigured in one way or another:

Cinderella, the princess and the frog and so on.

Ponce de Leon splashed through the Florida swamps in search of transfiguration at the legendary Fountain of Youth.

Movies these days are, if anything, more fanciful than ever about people being transformed:

Tom Hanks in *Big*, the Lord of the Rings series, the Harry Potter series.

And then there are the very serious ways in which we long for transfiguration — in our own weaknesses and compulsions;

in our relationships gone sour at work, in the neighborhood, or at home.

We see that we live in a disfigured world, whether in the evil done on our behalf in Iraq, the pandemic of AIDS in Africa,

or the pantastrophe of global warming wrought by our own careless greed.

Or even in the toils of the Anglican Communion, wrought more tightly and closely every day.

Oh, that all of this could be transfigured by the glory of God,
 the showing forth of the very presence of God in Christ!

The story of Jesus' transfiguration graces us with the assurance that revelations of God's glory are to be treasured and cherished, not dismissed.

Mountaintop experiences, spiritual highs, whatever,

confirm what we knew or suspected, but had come to doubt.

They are a gift, as the transfiguration was for Jesus:

God letting us know that what we knew in our first love for God is really true and still true.

The season that opens tomorrow is an opportunity to let that happen to us and for us, and about that so much can and should be said, but I'm running out of time.

So I end just with a note about the takeaway for us:

It was many years ago that I realized that my favorite verse in the Bible is 2 Corinthians 3.18, Paul's exultant proclamation of the transfiguring power of the glory of God that we hear in tonight's epistle:

"And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

That is the source of the longing that we express in tonight's collect:

"Grant that we, beholding by faith the light of Christ's countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross,

and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory."
At the heart of the mystic vision has always been the view that the vision of God is itself
transforming,
and that if we truly see God we cannot help but be transfigured.
From a Christian standpoint, that vision of the light of God is to be found in the vision of
the face of Jesus – the countenance of Jesus, as the collect puts it –
transfigured in glory.
That happens in manifold ways – in contemplation,
in engaged discipleship,
in the countless unexpected gifts of revelation God offers us in all the highways
and byways of our lives.
*In it all, and with it all, and through it all we give ourselves over to the very real
possibility that we are indeed being changed into Christ's likeness, from
one degree of glory to another.*

*And now to God who sits upon the throne and to Christ the Lamb,
be worship and praise, dominion and glory forever and forevermore. Amen.*