

## Unblinded By the Light

Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of Jesus was one of the most spectacular and most perplexing events that his disciples ever witnessed. Which is really saying something when you stop and consider how up until that point in time, they had already seen him restore vision to blind eyes, give voice to mute tongues, raise a dead girl to life, calm a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and feed a crowd of thousands with nothing more to work with than five loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

Transfiguration comes from the same Greek word that is the root of our word, “metamorphosis”. And, what those three disciples witnessed on the mountaintop, was a transformation of Jesus as dramatic as the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly. His dusty old robes suddenly became dazzling white and his face shone like the sun. Then Moses and Elijah, two of the most important figures from Israel’s past, suddenly appeared and were having a conversation with Jesus.

Matthew’s record of these strange events opens with the observation that *six days later, Jesus took with him his three closest disciples—Peter, James and John—and led them up the mountain*. Which tells us that the key to making sense of the Transfiguration can be found in something that had happened six days before the event itself. That *something* turns out to have been a conversation Jesus had with the disciples, during which he tried to prepare them for the difficulties that lay ahead of them. He explained to them that they would be going to Jerusalem and once there, he would be opposed by the religious and political leaders, be executed and after three days be raised from the dead.

It wasn’t what they wanted to hear. They wanted to believe that Jerusalem would be the place where Jesus would be welcomed and recognized as the one chosen by God to overthrow Israel’s enemies. Peter dug in his heels and insisted that they would never let the things he predicted happen to him. But Jesus scolded Peter for only thinking from the limited vision of a human perspective, while being blinded to the ways of God.

Six days after that episode, when Jesus led Peter, James and John up the mountain, the grim realities Jesus had described probably still echoed in their minds. Is it any wonder then, that when they witnessed Jesus basking in the light of God’s glory in the esteemed company of Moses and Elijah, Peter jumped at the chance to suggest building shelters on that spot, where they could all stay safe and secure from the dangers awaiting them in Jerusalem?

But barely had he expressed the idea when a bright cloud surrounded them and a voice said: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” Because up until then,

the disciples *hadn't* really been listening to what Jesus was saying; at least not when what he was saying was something they didn't want to hear.

Before a voice from heaven commanded them to listen to Jesus, they had closed their ears to hearing what he tried to tell them. Before they ever saw Jesus glow with an intensity that made them turn their heads away, they had already closed their eyes to God's vision for them. If anything, the intensity of light on the mountaintop was intended to *unblind* them from their eyes-clenched-shut resistance to God's will for them.

The most significant thing about the Transfiguration then, is not how Jesus was temporarily changed in his outward appearance, but in how the disciples needed to be permanently transformed in their understanding of him and what it meant for them to be his disciples.

It is also a story about the necessity of our own transfiguration—our own metamorphoses.

The account of Jesus' Transfiguration is told in three of the four Gospels. But the Greek word which gets translated as "transfigured" in Matthew, Mark and Luke, also appears twice outside the Gospels—in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In both instances, the word is related not to Jesus, but to followers of Jesus. In his Epistle to the Romans he writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." In 2 Corinthians Paul writes, "And all of us ... seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being *transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another." So, Transfiguration is not just something that happened to Jesus. It is something that is supposed to be happening to us, as his followers.

After Peter, James and John were unblinded by the light of Jesus' Transfiguration, Jesus said, "Get up and do not be afraid." We might think that what Jesus meant was that the disciples need not be afraid of the bizarre visions they had just witnessed atop the mountain. But I tend to believe that what he was encouraging them not to fear was the risks of discipleship that they would soon face. And, that he was emboldening them to reject their impulse to shelter in place in the safety of the mountaintop, when there was work for them to do in the valley.

This wouldn't be the last time that Jesus singled out Peter, James and John and invited them to witness a different kind of intimate moment between him and his heavenly Father. On the night of his betrayal and arrest, when the wheels of his crucifixion were set irrevocably in motion, Jesus brought those same three disciples with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed to God that it might not be necessary for him to suffer and die, and that this cup might pass from him. That prayer ended though with a final plea, not to be sheltered from what lay ahead of him, but that God's will be done.

Maybe Jesus wanted these three disciples who had witnessed God's glory revealed in magnificent light, to see what it meant to place one's trust in God even in the darkest night of despair. Perhaps... so that they could encourage others, including you and me, to be a light in the darkest places of our world.

The season of Lent begins this week with the Ash Wednesday service. May this Lent be a time for identifying and letting go of the ways we prefer sheltering in our own comfort zones, rather than getting up and following where Jesus is leading *us*. It is the opportune time for *us* to be unblinded by the light of Christ's glory, which can dispel the darkness around us—and the darkness within us. Time to set aside the obstacles that may be getting in the way of our being transformed into the people he is calling us to be, so that our sights are clearly set on the glory of God.

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