

Homily - Transfiguration

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In The Upper Room, one of those daily devotionals from a few years back Paul Hovey tells of a little boy who regularly played near a mission compound and was befriended by the missionary. One day, the boy asked the missionary, "Do you recognize me?" Surprised, the missionary replied, "Why, yes, of course." The boy explained, "I've become a Christian, and I didn't know if you would know who I was." You see, this boy expected that since he felt so changed within, his appearance must be transformed as well.

We often associate internal change with a transfiguration or a change in appearance. Our Scripture passage today meets us in that expectation. At a turning point in the earthly life of Jesus, the Transfiguration is accompanied by a change in appearance.

If you ask a Christian what part of Jesus' earthly ministry they would want to witness, not many would say the Transfiguration. Most would want to watch the birth, the baptism, the resurrection, the ascension or the Cross.

Not many would say they want to see the Transfiguration. However, the glory of Jesus shines forth during his time in the mountain with Moses and Elijah. And, God's pronouncement is unmistakable. "This is my son, my chosen one; listen to Him!"

The transfiguration story is a complex one that is chock full of symbolism, symbolism that we often miss today. This symbolism is important in declaring Jesus as Messiah and as the Son of God.

The Transfiguration passage that we just heard from Luke (and the corresponding ones in the other synoptic gospels (Matthew 17 and Mark 9) represent a significant milestone and perhaps highpoint in the life of Jesus.

Jesus is shown talking with two of the greatest figures from the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah.

He is shown in his glory that is yet to come, a glory that is in this point of the biblical narrative still misunderstood by the disciples. And, in some way that we may never understand, God actually speaks from the clouds and says *'this is my son whom I have chosen. Listen to him.'* Is there anything that can be grander than that?

As readers of the Gospels we know about the death and resurrection of Jesus. We know about the early church and its struggles to convince both Jews and Gentiles

about the authenticity of Christ. We know that Jesus is both human and divine and has both a ministry here on earth and a place in heaven. We know the ending of the story and sometimes skip right by the stages in the life of Jesus. Our passage today doesn't let us skip right to the end.

Instead, we look at the stage in which Jesus is revealed as the Messiah. Each of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke show this revelation of Jesus as a very important milestone, a turning point. While Jesus has an earthly ministry that continues for several chapters, Luke depicts this stage, the Transfiguration milestone in the journey that Jesus is making to his ultimate destiny in Jerusalem.

In all three synoptic gospels the Transfiguration story includes three disciples of Jesus – Peter, John and James. These three disciples seem to be closest to Jesus and there are several instances throughout the Gospels where they are alone with Jesus. The most notable is before the arrest of Jesus at Gethsemane and the raising of the daughter of Jairus in Luke 8.

Jesus takes these three disciples up the mountain. The symbolism of the mountain is common in the Bible and the word 'mountain' is used 91 times in the Old Testament and 63 times in the New Testament. "Mountains and hills are a master image of the Bible, through which one can trace the whole course of biblical history and doctrine in microcosm. As symbols mountains declare the nature of God. As the place where humans encounter the divine, they epitomize how God and people related to each other. The three Bible passages that first come to mind for mountains are the physical location of Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19-20), the mountain on which the devil tempted Jesus (Matthew 4), and the mountain on which Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). Thus, it is fitting that Jesus would go up into the mountain for the Transfiguration experience.

It is also fitting that prayer would be an important part of the Transfiguration narrative. Jesus teaches us about the importance of prayer.

He teaches us, but, even more, in the synoptic gospels Jesus actually prays 34 times. Jesus demonstrates prayer in his daily living, and both here in the Transfiguration and in Gethsemane Jesus demonstrates that prayer is to be made part of the important moments of life, both highs and lows. Prayer may have been a necessary, prerequisite part of the Transfiguration story.

One of the interesting differences in the three synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration has to do with the change to the physical appearance of Jesus during prayer. "Only Luke states that Jesus' appearance changed as he prayed. Matthew tells that the face of Jesus shone, while Mark notes only the brilliance of His clothing."

None of the gospels says that the actual being or role of Jesus changed during the Transfiguration. It is only the way that he is seen that changes. Perhaps the disciples will begin to have a different perspective about the unchanging Jesus.

The change to the appearance or countenance of Jesus is described by the gospel writers in a way that conveys some type of supernatural occurrence. Matthew used the symbolism of light to illustrate this difference. Mark says that the clothing of Jesus was whiter than any technology or cloth dyer could ever make it. Luke describes the cloths as 'flashing.'

Luke uses the awesome description of the light you get with a flash of lightening. This was probably one of the most amazing sights seen in the ancient world. I wonder what amazing description we might use today. Flash of lightening might still work.

Today's passage shows Jesus with Moses and Elijah. It is difficult to understand how Peter, James and John understood that the two figures were Moses and Elijah. Perhaps, they were told by Jesus or perhaps, there was some type of characteristic that marked them as the people they were. However, at least Peter recognized them immediately as the representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Both Matthew and Luke structure their gospels to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. The covenant made between God and the Jewish people is brought to completion in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Moses and Elijah are the two best representatives to show this connection between the Old Testament covenant and Jesus. Moses is revered as the human agent of God's delivery of the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt. He not only led the exodus but guided his people through the wilderness to Mount Sinai, where, while on the mountaintop covered with thunder and clouds, he was given the Ten Commandments. Later, as the traditional author of the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis through Deuteronomy, he is identified with the Old Testament Law and as the first of the Hebrew Prophets.

Elijah is also identified with both the Law and the Prophets. In 1 and 2 Kings we are told how Elijah calls the people back to the Laws given by Moses and back to proper relationship with Yahweh, away from worship of Baal. In many ways Elijah is the representative of the later Hebrew Prophets.

Moses was the first prophet, Elijah was one of the greatest, and Jesus is the final prophet.

There are further reasons for Jesus to be with Moses and Elijah during the transfiguration.

They each have their experiences with God or a theophany on a mountaintop. Like Moses with the burning bush and on Mount Sinai, Elijah had an experience with God up on Mount Horab. Here is that mountain symbolism again.

There is a third similarity between Moses, Elijah and Jesus. They each have an unusual death that shows the special mark of God. Moses was buried by none other than God in Moab at an unspecified place (Deuteronomy 34:6). Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2). And, Jesus died on the Cross and was resurrected three days later.

This Transfiguration passage in Luke actually alludes to that death of Jesus on the Cross. Unlike the other two synoptic representations, which only show Jesus with Moses and Elijah, Luke actually shows Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah. The passage says "*They spoke of his departure.*" (9:31) Now, you should know that the Greek word used for 'departure' has the double connotation of both death and ascension. The word is reminiscent of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt but in the connotation of Luke means to leave this life.

This is a foreshadowing of the type of glory that will be for Jesus when he gets to Jerusalem. We can see this foreshadowing but the disciples on the mountain do not.

Peter, John and James, still did not realize the type of role that Jesus was to play. They still believed that he would be a Messiah that came in strength and may have incorrectly thought that the association Jesus had with Moses and Elijah was a demonstration of that power. They wanted Jesus to be the Messiah that liberated them from the Romans. Instead, Luke shows us by using a word for both death and ascension that even if the disciples had the wrong impression, Jesus knew of his upcoming role.

The next verse of our passage reinforces our understanding of the disciples' confusions. "*Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep...*" It is not clear from the Greek whether they were only drowsy but managed to keep awake or whether they actually fell asleep and woke up. Whatever the situation, the disciples were far from alert during the conversation about Jesus' approaching passion.

Then out of the cloud comes the voice of God. Cloud images are used throughout the Bible including Genesis 9 with the rainbow after the flood, the pillar of cloud that guided Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt and the thunder/cloud that covered Mount Sinai during Moses' experiences with God there. In each of these examples,

God is present in the clouds but the overwhelming presence is covered to protect the viewer. It is the same here in the Transfiguration narrative. The voice out of the cloud is a standard way of depicting a theophany, the awesome, overwhelming actual presence of God.

God's voice from the clouds addresses the three disciples and declares, "*This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.*" All three of the gospel accounts have this high point in God's declaration. As readers, we are already aware of the role of Jesus. However, the disciples are still coming to this realization and God's statement is an unequivocal assertion of Jesus' awesome, special, and unique position.

As they came down from the mountain, Jesus told Peter, James and John not to talk about what they had seen there. Though they knew Jesus was God's Son, they did not yet know what being God's Son meant.

They don't, but we do.

We know that God's Son was arrested, beaten and killed. We know that he rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.

And, we know that in some way that can't fully understand, Jesus is still with us here today. He is surrounding us with love. He is guiding us. He is with us so that each of our own lives may continue to be transfigured in beautiful ways that we can hardly imagine.

It would be simplistic and plain wrong to say that you can tell the goodness of a person just by looking at them. Thought TV would tell us differently, a person's physical appearance has no correlation to how good or bad they are.

However, you can often look at the life of a person, and see beauty and goodness.

My prayer for us today, is that folks would be able to look at our lives as followers of Jesus and see something that they want. My prayer is that our transfigured lives will be a role model for others, so that others point and say, "I want what they have. How can I get it?"