

This account of what we call the “Transfiguration” of Jesus has traditionally been part of the church calendar as we start drawing near to the Lenten season and Easter Sunday. It’s one of the most dazzling, and puzzling, scenes in the entire Bible.

This Transfiguration raises a number of questions. Why do Peter, James and John see Peter in the fullness of His transparent God-glory: but just this once? (I could understand none, or maybe several times—but why just once, and why now in the gospel narrative?) Why does Jesus appear, transfigured, not to a crowd, not to His twelve, but to just these three? Why does He never appear so dramatically to people these days—for that matter, why does religious faith, trust, seem to come so hard for some people and apparently so easily for others? And what was the point of this scene: what did God want to accomplish from this transfiguration of Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah?

This Transfiguration also answers some other questions: Who is Jesus? How can we know? What is God’s idea of the proper relationship between the Old and New Testaments, between the Law and the Gospel? What is the relationship between Jesus and other holy people, other religious leaders? How wise is it to trust in church leadership rather than in the Holy Spirit? In whom may we ultimately trust, and why? What are we to do with the insights, the faith we’ve been given? [I’d be happy to talk with you about any of these: I hope you’ll meet me on the courtyard after Worship or email me your thoughts about some of these questions.]

These answers are all hidden in plain sight in our passage—but this is a far more glorious scene than to be treated as a systematic theology paragraph of questions and answers. So I’d like to explore this scene from the perspective of Peter, one of the three present, the one who had just been appointed head of Christ’s Church a week before. Let’s think of Peter as representative of us followers of Jesus.

Peter’s minding his own business when he feels a tug at his sleeve. It’s Jesus; “come with Me, Peter...” And there are James and John, discretely called away also. Jesus was always one step ahead of them; always a bit unpredictable. What’s this about? What could Jesus have up His sleeve this time? But Peter doesn’t dare ask Him. They keep ascending, their breath growing labored, gradually breaking into a sweat. (Which mountain was it? Scholars who speculate miss the point: remember another former leader who ascended to the top of a mountain, and came down with his face shining radiantly, dazzling the Israelites awaiting him at the bottom of Mt Sinai, carrying “the Law,” the Ten Commandments? The “high mountain” is a new Mt Sinai, and this Anointed One Jesus is a new and greater Moses.)

Now here comes an attention grabber. The Christ is transfigured before the three: “bright as light,” a zillion watts blazing thru Him; even His robe is radiant. The glory of God within Jesus the Son almost always muted before and after this one display; the inner essence of Jesus now blasting out and overflowing into this visible earthly dimension so Peter and the others could behold it—if only just this once.

Then later comes more: Moses and Elijah, representatives of the highest themes in Judaism—the Law and the prophets—are there, alive, conversing with Jesus. The three apostles are overcome at this dimension shift, this breakthrough of the eternal into space and time. (Words fail Matthew in trying to describe it, although I believe it’s

intentionally given to the leaders of the Church on the brink of the heartbreaking events in Jerusalem: given them as encouragement to sustain them thru the horror of the cross, Good Friday, and also a foreshadowing of the glory of God displayed on Easter Sunday morning and beyond in the final dimension of our lives—that eternal dimension beyond the hour of our death into which Jesus invites us.)

You would think the three would be so overcome by fear and awe they would be struck silent, as in a dream when even if you try to speak nothing comes out, not even a squeak. Not Peter. Good old Peter. The God of the universe, God the Father, is finally communicating into this dimension (not audibly yet—that comes a moment later from the cloud—but clear enough!!!)...and what does Peter do?

He interrupts God. He “answers,” as in a conversation with James about how the Jerusalem Dodgers lost a close one yesterday. Peter, Peter, Peter...and what he says is so extremely lame: “It is good for us to be here today...” (And then he wants to play travel agent: “Jesus: could I book you three smoking or non-smoking rooms; would you prefer two double beds or a king?...”)

I’m being silly, of course—but Matthew does enjoy a little humor at Peter’s expense. We’re told that God had to cut in; God knew if He waited ‘til Peter was done nattering, He’d be waiting a long time. God has to interrupt Peter chattering about the accommodations.

“*Look!*” Still, while Peter was going on and on; “*Look!*” the bright cloud is there, at once revealing and hiding the presence of the Holy One of Israel: the Voice of God thunders “This is My beloved Son, [My One and only] in whom I delight. Listen to Him!” Only at this point does Peter fall to the ground—maybe his knees buckle under him. (Trivia question: God the Father speaks only twice in the gospels so others can hear: what does He say? Exactly this, exactly the same thing: at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, His baptism [ch 3] and here near the end of His ministry. Here the Voice of God adds, “So listen to Him; do what He tells you!”)

Amazing stuff. Farfetched, musings from a wild imagination, some would say. Symbolic language created later to make a point, others would scoff. Flesh and blood cannot comprehend this scene any more than a laptop can fall in love. How can a computing machine, even a human brain, comprehend beyond this dimension of logic and empirical, repeatable data? “Blessed are you when you consider all the data of the world—your heart and your mind and your imagination and your spirit,” as Peter did, as Jesus did...Not when you are merely being gullible and foolish, of course—but we are more than computers in a body, and reality is far more rich than what can be proven and repeated in a laboratory...

It’s easy for us scientific-minded people in 2007 to assume this supernatural scene from back then has little or nothing for us. One of my friends earlier this week was lamenting, “Why don’t I ever get a burning bush?” Sure enough, instead of dramatic burning bushes most of us get dandelions in our yards, or would if our grass ever grew long enough. Do you ever wonder why *you* never get these dramatic epiphanies, or, technically, “theophanies”—direct experiences of God breaking into this dimension?

I would caution before we “go there.” Best be careful what you wish for. Be careful about wishing for information you have to do something with. “To whom much is given, much is required of her.”

Moses got the burning bush—and he also got the command to go marching in to the great and powerful Pharaoh, to demand that he “Let my people go”—and Moses never had any peace the rest of his life after that burning bush.

Mary got a visit from the angel Gabriel—and you know what happened to her hourglass figure and her future. “And a sword pierced her soul”...and her life was never uncomplicated or worry-free again.

Peter witnessed this dazzling divine light and sound show—and his life only grew less and less comfortable and easy until he was finally nailed to his own cross, crucified in Rome—upside down, not presuming himself to be equal to His Lord Jesus.

You remember Gideon, and Elisha, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Saul of Tarsus, to name a few. A call from God, a conversion experience, does not happen to *entertain* us. A conversion experience always occurs in order to call us into God’s service—to give us our God-assignment. A dramatic experience will call us into a dramatic assignment. This Transfiguration did not occur for the benefit of Jesus—God caused it to happen for the benefit of Peter, James and John—and us, Christ’s Church. When we experience something of the Transcendent One, it is information we are to *do* something with.

You and I do not usually get the Transfiguration level of pyrotechnics; what do we usually get?

I am convinced God gives us all we need to experience according to what we are prepared to act upon. If you are desperately hungry for more of the guidance, more of the Presence of God, don’t worry: God can be trusted to meet you. (“Which of you, if your child asks for an egg, will feed it a scorpion? How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” [Lk 11:12])

I am convinced God will grant us as much revelation, as much convincing, as we need—as much as we are ready to handle, and more. But am I ready to drop what I’m doing and accept God’s assignment, small or large, for me? Am I ready to continue with what I’m doing with a new spirit, if it be God’s will for me? Am I ready to give up my stranglehold on the comforts and the perks, the entire life I always thought I wanted, achieved on the terms I always dictated, should God reveal a different assignment to me? Am I willing to pick up my cross each day to follow Him, exchanging my life which will hold me back in order to gain His life which will in turn bring me the life I was created for and long for? Am I willing to not only allow Him to guide my choices but to offer Him my entire life and body and dayplanner and checkbook? Not He my personal consultant but I His willing slave?

I don’t blame anyone for whatever he’s ready or not ready to offer his Lord, and I don’t think Jesus does either. (I think Jesus is more sad about our holding back—mine surely included.) Only let’s not blame God if we don’t seem to be receiving the inner direction, the answer to prayers we claim we want. The fact is that while none of us has experienced anything like that Transfiguration of Jesus, I know you in this church have encountered God in numerous ways. Some of you *have* had mystical encounters with Jesus. Some of you, like me, have known God’s sure grasp to lift you up out of the depths. Some of you, when you have admitted a gnawing emptiness, have come to Jesus and been filled. Some of you have called out to Him when the weight of your shame and guilt became unbearable; some have finally gotten tired of messing up your life. Some have cried out when you have hit bottom; some of you have simply dared to hope for far

more in life than you were experiencing. Has God not been faithful and spoken to us, with subtlety or drama, one way or another, to each of us who has gotten serious with Him? And does He not sometimes anticipate our attitudes, leading us gently ahead even before we know we're ready?

[In this church we emphasize the spiritual disciplines in order to intentionally remain open to the presence and guidance of God: God is not limited to, but may speak unmistakably to us as we pray each day; as we study the Scripture each day; as we gather in small groups for His sake; as we invite others into relationship with Christ or His Church; as we pursue our mentoring relationships; as we tithe 10% of our income; as we pursue our God-assignment, our life-work, or the discovering of it. God may speak to us during worship, or thru the sacraments; thru encountering the needy or the very different from us for Jesus' sake. This very morning Joe DiChiro and a number of our adults and a larger number of our teens and children are in Mexico, working with the orphans, building the daycare center where Jesus will be taught the children without anything. Do you ever wonder why the young people, once they go to this mission project once, cannot be held back while so many of our adults are reluctant to go at all? Isn't it that we all trust the promise of Jesus: the kids expect they will somehow meet Jesus thru the needy, and the adults expect the same thing—but we also intuit we may be asked to do something with the information we gain, the squalid world we enter into, if only for a weekend. We are reluctant to rearrange our comfortable view of the world, are we not?

Anyway God is not limited: the question is how hungry are you and I? How trustworthy have we been with whatever nudging, whatever instruction or guiding we have received? If we have been trustworthy with little, God will surely entrust us with more insight, more experience of His presence, more clarity.]

One more theme from Peter, which pertains to each of us. Have you wondered why Peter behaves so oddly, right as God is breaking thru into this dimension? God finally appearing, and Peter talking uncontrollably?

Wouldn't you be a little nervous, too? Don't you think Peter is crazy scared? He's already off balance from last week—now he's caught totally off guard, he's on "terra unfirmata" (thanks to one of our Retreat women last week.) He doesn't think, he reacts. When we get scared, we are not creative, not open. We react. You think an encounter with the Light of the World, "bright as Light", is not scary? Jesus is more than our God-human Pal. "If You should mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand..." [Ps 130:3]

Heather reminded us last Sunday: fear is a handy excuse to stay away from the Spirit of God, to avoid going deep with Jesus. Peter's fear is our own fear. Why else are we so slow to draw near to God, to spend the time, the energy, to develop our life of insistent, expectant, obedient prayer? "But I'm so busy; my day is so long; Prayer doesn't work for me anyway; see all the things I already want to do for you, Jesus. Sorry—I'll pray when I get home from work this time..."

I've heard many people complain that prayer doesn't really "work" for them. (I used to be one!) They insist they have tried to pray, and it's not worth it. Nothing. But I'm not convinced any one of these has gone to the mat for a period of time, has offered full obedience to whatever God may require (no fingers crossed), has been willing to take even the necessary "next steps" preceding any small shift or even a major life change.

We have our own very handy reasons prayer doesn't really work, how come God never speaks to *me* (oh, I know the secret excuses: some of them have been mine, too.)

But most often they all lead back to fear, to being unwilling to trust God. My fear keeps the Spirit of God at arm's length. God will not necessarily batter thru my excuses or defenses. *Of course* we'd be afraid if we actually expected the living God was going to demand that we let go, eventually, of everything that's not working; prune every branch not bearing fruit; if we had to allow Him to expunge every habit that has mastered us; to offer Him our every skill, talent, resource; to yield every dark secret and repressed sinful act in to the blazing light of His glory; to sell all that we have to obtain the Pearl of great price.

Of course we yield in fear, to one degree or other, like Peter, James and John. But fear can be the last threshold we cross over on the way into life in a new God-dimension.

Perhaps the most impressive man I met in my three years of Seminary (SFTS) was the Rev. Howard Rice. He lived his life not on his knees, but close—in a wheelchair. He was chaplain of the Seminary, and would normally preach each Friday. He had served as an able-bodied pastor for many years; I don't remember the illness or trauma which had confined him to his wheelchair long before I came across him. He was perhaps the most widely respected person on that fractious campus. Divisive, hot button issues joined all around him, and incredible inflexible passions on many fronts: gay and lesbian issues; animal rights issues, Liberation theology and Feminist and Mujerista theology and Process theology and Black theology (never mind Liberal and Orthodox) and a very liberal faculty overseen by a moderate Board who had trouble raising money for obvious reasons; and so many students coming to him—future pastors—melting down into various psychological puddles for all sorts of reasons.

But when Howard finished preaching he'd roll himself down the center aisle of Stewart Chapel, persons from all the different factions couldn't help but bend down to hug the man outside the narthex. He was not very sentimental, was not particularly touchy-feely...but he spoke and lived with a compassion and a faithfulness you could not miss. He radiated caring and integrity. Being a commuter student (Catherine was a baby and Trish was working hard and traveling for business—I didn't hang around at SFTS unnecessarily) I only regret I didn't ever get to know him better, but you couldn't help but look up to him even as you reached down to hug Howard or shake his hand on the way out of Worship.

He had not always been so deeply beloved. He had formerly been a competent pastor, when he used to be able to walk as most people do—but only when his mobility was taken from him, he truly learned to Christ's pastor. At first he was very frightened—but he knew in Whom to trust. Of course he learned compassion and patience thru his loss—but mostly he learned the difference between trusting in his own capacities and trusting in the One who carried him thru to make his spirit and his life whole, even as his prayers for his legs to work again remained unanswered. After he lost the use of his legs, I don't suppose much else scared Howard. He offered what he had all over again to Jesus, and learned to be His servant now more fully empowered by Him. He learned the difference between doing the best he knew how, and making himself gladly available for the best the Spirit of God knew how.

This is how the Transfiguration scene ends. There are Peter James and John sprawled face-down in the dust, so dramatically aware of that 15-mile chasm separating

them from the glory of God. And Jesus, in His compassion and clarity, comes over to them. He touches them: “Arise. Now. Into a new dimension of life. Keep on not being afraid—from now on.”

“Arise”—even though he’s talking to frightened, nattering, chattering, face-down Peter: “Arise.” This is not a word for posture improvement. This is a big word—a word used to describe some dimension shattering of its own! The word used for being roused from sleep or unawareness. It’s the same word used for the paralytic commanded to “Arise” from his pallet and now walk. [Mt 9:1-7] The same word used when the healed leper comes back and bows to Jesus: “Arise;...your trust in Me has made you whole” [Lk 17:19] Same word used for the little girl who is dead, when Jesus arrives: “*Talitha cum!* Little girl, Arise.” She is restored, alive again, and they bring her something to eat. [Mk 5:41]

Of course Peter is scared. Of course he’s aware of his many shortcomings, of all the many ways in which he has compromised, chickened out, faltered, and generally let down his Lord. But Peter has one thing going for him, as Howard Rice has and you and I have.

Jesus is saying, “Arise,” Peter. “Arise,” James. “Arise,” John.

Jesus is saying, “Arise,” every dear one of you.

Matthew 17:1-8

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as the light.

And look! There appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, look! A bright cloud overshadowed them, and look! From the cloud a voice said, "This is my one and only Son, the Beloved; with Him I am well pleased; listen to Him!"

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Arise. Do not be afraid any more."

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone.