

McCabe United Methodist Church

Transfiguration Day

Transfigured Reality

Sermon on Luke 9:28-43 (2/6 & 2/7/16)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

“Transfiguration: A change in form or appearance. A metamorphosis. An exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change.”¹ *Transfiguration*.

If you've ever heard the word “transfiguration,” I suspect you heard it in a church...because I have no idea where else it ever gets used. But it's a great word for a powerful story in Jesus' life.

“A change in form or appearance. A metamorphosis. An exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change.” *Transfiguration*.

This weekend marks the celebration of what we in the church call “Transfiguration Day.”

Though not every church chooses to honor this particular holy day, when Transfiguration Day comes around, it's always this time of the year... because, when it is celebrated, Transfiguration is celebrated the weekend ahead of when Lent begins. And, since Lent begins this week on Ash Wednesday, that means this is the weekend of Transfiguration.

The season of Lent is the 40-day season of the church year during which we walk with Jesus toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday.

Lent is very often a somber, reflective time when we focus on our sin and on our great dependence on God's mercy toward us: divine mercy that was shown most poignantly in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross...and divine mercy that was transformed into his glorious resurrection, offering us hope for eternal life and hope in all things on earth.

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transfiguration>

Though our weekend worship services in Lent may not fully reflect the “somber” nature of the Lenten season, our Wednesday services will.

I certainly hope you will consider joining us for those services as a way of gathering together with brothers and sisters in Christ to confess our sins and to grow closer to God as we journey through this holy season.

But...*before* the season of Lent begins...Transfiguration Day: a day marked by the peculiar story we just heard from chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel.

As the story goes, after spending much time teaching and healing, Jesus took a few of his disciples – Peter, James, and John – to the top of a mountain in order to spend time in deep prayer. At some point while they were up on this mountaintop, the disciples fell fast asleep – and, in doing so, they very nearly missed an incredibly holy moment.

See, while Jesus was praying, “his face changed and his clothes became shining white. Suddenly Moses and Elijah were there speaking with him. They appeared in heavenly glory and talked about all that Jesus' death in Jerusalem would mean”.

That was the moment of Transfiguration – the moment when Jesus was thoroughly *changed in form and appearance*...the moment he experienced an *exalting, glorifying, spiritual change*. And the three disciples almost missed it because they'd been sleeping!

When they woke-up and saw what has happening near them, after surely taking a beat to discern just what exactly was going on, Peter exclaimed, “Master, it is good for us to be here! Let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” It was as if Peter was trying to keep them all there in that holy, mountaintop moment.

While Peter was saying that, the shadow of a cloud passed over them and then surrounded them: the disciples were terrified. Then, out of the cloud, God's voice proclaimed, “This is my chosen Son. Listen to what he says.”

(Incidentally, in Luke chapter 3, God spoke similar words about Jesus – also from the clouds – as Jesus came up out of the water after he was baptized... So, in many ways, *today's* story – the story of Jesus' Transfiguration on that mountaintop – is just as important as the story of his baptism in the Jordan River.)

After God spoke those words of affirmation about Jesus – words about how his disciples were to listen to *him* – as if on cue, Moses and Elijah disappeared and Jesus was again alone on the mountaintop with his disciples.

Now, Moses had himself been in God's very presence; he was the one who had received the Commandments from God so long ago on the top of Mt. Sinai. Moses was the ultimate human symbol of God's holy Law – and yet, he disappeared in Jesus' presence.

Elijah, too. One of the great prophets of Israel – the prophet who had been carried up to heaven in a whirlwind also disappeared in the presence of Jesus.

Moses and Elijah – Law and Prophets – both of them powerful figures in the history of the people of Israel...yet, when God's voice was heard, the disciples were told not to listen to *them*, but, rather, to listen to *Jesus*...God's Chosen...God's beloved Son.

The story of the Transfiguration is a strange one and there are a lot of mysterious things happening in it: Jesus' face changed, his clothes started shining, Moses and Elijah appeared, a cloud blew in...God spoke out of that cloud...and then, just as quickly as it all began, it was over.

The moment of Transfiguration passed...and life returned to "normal." They went down the mountain and Jesus and his disciples got back to what they'd been doing before.

But you've got to believe things were somehow *different* for each of them after that...right? I mean, how do you experience something like what they experienced on that mountaintop and *not* have everything seem somehow *different*?

Perhaps something kind of like this has happened to you or to someone you know: you had a powerful, spiritual experience...and then, afterwards, everything seemed *different* somehow – like the world shined a bit more brightly...like there was hope in the midst of human despair... like the difficult circumstances of your life weren't quite as difficult...like there was light at the end of the tunnel...like you could begin to see your way through the messiness and the chaos this life so often brings.

Your perspective about life and about the world shifted in light of your experience. Maybe that perspective shift lasted a few days, a few months...and maybe that shift stuck with you.

In my own life, the powerful, spiritual experiences that have brought on *transfiguration-type* shifts in my perspective have often happened during “times apart” with God and with brothers and sisters in Christ: camp... mission trips...retreats.

But such transfiguration-type shifts often come at other times, and in the midst of other experiences as well. I've seen this happen for others in the midst of a mysterious healing or even in the midst of a loved one's death.

I've also seen this happen for people in the midst of the birth or the adoption of a child...in the midst of other significant changes in life like moving to a new place, starting a new school, going through a divorce, losing a job, or discerning a new professional path.

For Jesus, the Transfiguration happened at a time when he knew he needed to turn his focus toward Jerusalem – toward his last days on earth...toward the time when he would be betrayed and denied by two of his closest friends...toward his trial ...toward his torturous death on the cross...but, also, toward his glorious resurrection from the dead.

Any life-changing, perspective-altering experience we have in this life will pale in comparison to all that Jesus went through. Yet we can find glimpses of *his* experience in our own: glimpses of the sacrifice *and* glimpses of the glory.

When we find those glimpses, they are meant to *transfigure* our reality: they are meant to inspire a change in who are and who we become.

And, regardless of whether or not we've yet had these transfiguration -type experiences, as Christian people, our reality should always, in a way, be a *transfigured* reality...because our reality should always be cross-shaped: how we experience and understand everything in this life should be defined by both *sacrifice* and *glory*...by both death and resurrection.

This week, as we move into the season of Lent, it's fair to acknowledge that life in this world can be awful – we all have sin in our lives, we all have pain and struggle.

And, even if we are doing all right in this moment, we don't have to look too far around the world (or across town, or around our section of the worship space) to find people who are *not* doing all right.

Ugliness and pain and struggle are everywhere – and they can look and feel like the things that *define* our reality. But...

But, for people of Christian faith, ugliness and pain and struggle can never be the things that define our reality. Our reality is a *transfigured* reality. Our reality is one of healing...of comfort...of strength...of change...peace...gratitude...of hope – in *all* things.

Our reality is a reality that thoroughly changes everything.

And that reality comes to us as a gift from our God: our God who made all things and who transformed Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross into glorious resurrection.

May we be ever grateful for this holy reality...and may our lives be ever transfigured by it. Thanks be to God. Amen.