

Figuring The Transfiguration

(In Dazzling and Glorious Fashion)

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James,
and went up on the mountain to pray.

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed,
and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.
They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure,
which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep;
but since they had stayed awake,
they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus,
“Master, it is good for us to be here;
let us make three dwellings,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah ”
—not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them;
and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

Then from the cloud came a voice that said,
“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.
And they kept silent and in those days told no one
any of the things they had seen.

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Luke 9:28-36

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I.

Given our sermon text, I have been struggling this week with the difference or contrast between theory and application. Between those things we can only imagine, consider, and contemplate, and those things which we see, sense, and discover. Between that which the preacher might talk about in the sermon, and those things which each of us will undergo *in* our lives such that they *become* our lives. Between a Systematic theology which is comprehensive but abstract, and a Practical theology which is limited but actual. While it is certainly possible to attempt to span the distance between these two poles (often a fair stretch) the shortcut we seek is to collapse the distance through the experience of revelation. Which is exactly what we will endeavor to undertake this day. First, the theoretical and systematic.

II.

Our text today is the Lucan account of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John and goes up a mountain to pray. While in prayer, Jesus has a change in countenance, his clothes become dazzling white, and “in glory” Jesus chats with Moses and Elijah about his departure to Jerusalem, and what he must accomplish there (meaning the events which take place during what we now call Holy Week, or the days leading up to Easter). Then, a cloud forms, hovers over him, and a voice from the cloud says, “This is my son, listen to him.”

The primary thrust and significance of the Transfiguration story is a bold *Christological* claim (there is that term again). The passage is making a statement about both *who* Jesus is (his identity) and *what* Jesus is (his role and function).

III.

In many ways, this passage is a response to the question posed by King Herod just a few verses earlier in Chapter 9. Herod asks, “*John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?*” Answer? Jesus stands in glory as a peer to the forbearer of the Jewish faith, Moses; and, one of its greatest prophets, Elijah. Further, there is a plan for his life: Jesus is on his way to undertake great acts in accord with God’s covenantal relationship with the descendants of Abraham (which we discussed last week, see how all these things tie together). Moreover, that Jesus not just a leader or a prophet, but the very son of God, the chosen, and that we are to listen to him. Obviously, this is very important passage as we seek to understand the totality of the Gospel, and functions as an excellent harbinger of, and introduction to, the Lenten season into which Transfiguration Sunday ushers us this day.

IV.

Now, though, we come to the rub. I will warn you, I’m going to poke pretty hard at this so don’t get your orthodox hackles raised. Would it make any difference, really, in our Christological understanding, and the big picture ramifications of the Gospel, if the Transfiguration never happened? Isn’t it true that much of what transpires at the Transfiguration is simply a repeat of the events which took place at Jesus’ Baptism? Luke 3:21:

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy spirit descended upon him in a bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased.”

If we compare these two seminal events, the Baptism and the Transfiguration, we see two important differences emerge. (*Did you catch them?*)

V.

The first difference is in the audience and the message. In the story of Jesus’ Baptism, God seems to be speaking to *Jesus*; *you* are my son. In the story of Jesus’ Transfiguration, God seems to be speaking to those gathered, to Peter, James, and John (and, by extension, to all of us); *this* is my son. At Baptism, God tells Jesus *he* is the beloved. At Transfiguration, God tells *Peter, James and John* that Jesus is God’s chosen. At Baptism, God tells Jesus that in him God is well pleased. At Transfiguration, God tells Peter, James and John, that they are to listen to Jesus.

It would seem, therefore, that God's purpose at the Baptism was to convey a message *to* Jesus, himself, which affirmed to him his own authority. At the Transfiguration, though, it would seem God's purpose was to convey a message of authority *about* Jesus to Peter, James, and John.

VI.

The second difference between Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration is one of outcome. The result of his Baptism, at least in my estimation, was to usher in and equip Jesus for the *onset* of his ministry *in* the world through the *external* gift of the Spirit which rested on him like a dove. The result of the Transfiguration, again in my estimation, was to usher in and equip Jesus for the *conclusion* of his ministry *to* the world through the *internal* gift made manifest by the Transfiguration.

So, the central question of this text, to me, seems to be just what *is* the Transfiguration? What does the Transfiguration mean with respect to Christ, and what does it mean with respect to me and you? Now, it is at this point, that I start to get bogged down and I don't want you to get bogged down either. However, as adherents of a reasoned and learned faith, it seems we must at least explore the meaning of the concept of Transfiguration.

VII.

The Greek word which we translate as "Transfigure" is *Metamorphose*; a transformation. Problematically, though, we find this word used only in the Marcan and Matthean accounts; the word never appears in the Lucan account which we have for today's sermon text. A metamorphosis is an *inward* change that is also made known in an *outward* manifestation. So, for our purposes, something *happened* to Jesus up on that mountain, the external signs of which were a change in his face and that his clothes became dazzling white. More importantly, though, and what points to the nature of the inward change, is verse 32 which says that Peter, James, and John "*saw his glory.*" The Greek word we translate as "glory" is *Doxa*; meaning brightness, splendor, radiance.

VIII.

Doxa, Glory, is a word we use all the time here in the church. Every Sunday we sing the Doxology, the *Doxologi*, the praise of God's glory; and the Gloria Patri, Glory be to the Father. We sing, "All Glory, Laud and Honor,"

“Glory, Glory Hallelujah,” “To God Be The Glory,” “God of Grace and God of Glory,” and “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken.” If we think about it, though, the idea of Glory is really something we just talk *around*, rather than actually talk *about*; so let us talk *about* Glory for a minute.

Theologically, we understand Glory to be an attribute of God describing the divine essence as absolutely resplendent and ultimately magnificent. Symbolically, the empty cross, prominently displayed in our sanctuary, speaks of a *theology* of Glory, first coined by Martin Luther, which emphasizes God’s glorious attributes rather than the suffering of the cross. Most importantly, though, is our deep hope that one day we will share in Christ’s heavenly glory.

IX.

If we now go back up on the Mountain, and take our place along side Peter, James, and John we cannot help but ask this question of the Transfiguration of Jesus: Did Jesus receive such glory up on that Mountain, or was the Glory that was revealed simply a manifestation of the Glory he already possessed?”

The answer, I think, is yes! It would seem that what we have here is a matter of “the already and the not yet” (*which should help clear it up for you*). Usually, we explore scripture to understand God which, in turn, helps us to understand ourselves. However, the notion of the Transfiguration is one of those instances where we have to work it the other way around.

X.

One truth I would proclaim to you is that as the children of God we have *already* been Transfigured. When we come into this world, the Glory of God is woven into our bone and marrow, into our skin and spirit. At our Baptism we celebrate that through the power of the Holy Spirit we have been claimed by God and now belong to the Glory of Christ’s body. Each time we sit together at the Lord’s table we celebrate that Christ’s body has been broken for *us*. That we, too, share in the cup of salvation. And, that the glory of Christ’s resurrection, with its fruits of forgiveness, healing, and wholeness, are gifts which we have *already* received and enjoy through God’s grace.

XI.

A second truth I would proclaim to you is that, even now, we are still in the process of *being* Transfigured. That internal glory we already possess, is now being made manifest externally in our willingness to serve the Gospel, the church, and the world. However, the countenance which will change, is not just our own, but also that of the many people we will touch through our life together across the span of our lifetime.

Each of us here today in the sanctuary, on the stream, and reading these words has *already* been transfigured by God to share in God's glory. At the same time, each of us is *being* transfigured to manifest this gift of glory so that, being so richly equipped, we may show the Glory of God to any in this world who have eyes to see.

XII.

Each of us, like Christ up on the mountain, has had a seed of glory already planted deep within them. God's grace causes it to germinate and sprout. Through time, tribulation, our own vigorous attempts, and the leading of the Spirit, this glory has taken root and grown strong. Now, as we begin to blossom and bloom, the world begins to see God's glory shine through us, as we are joined to Christ, that together with him we might begin our Lenten walk to the cross of Calvary, and the promise of hope which is Easter Morning.

That, then, is the theoretical and systematic understanding of the concept of Transfiguration. Now for the actual and practical experience of Transfiguration as made known through revelation.

XIII.

As many of you are aware, Duncan, Sarah, Linda, and I became first-time grandparents last week with their son, Chris, and our daughter, Nicole, bringing their child, Alistair, into the world. While certainly wonderful, it is also somewhat unique to have the four of us going through such an experience together as couples who are not only neighbors, but also friends within the same church family. Though the experience is largely identical, how each of us *receives* that experience will inevitably be unique to the individual as I am sure was the case with Peter, John, and James that day upon the mountain with Jesus, and is always the case with experiences which

are revelatory in nature. I cannot speak for my fellow grandparents as to the nature of *their* revelation, but I would like to end today's sermon by sharing *mine* with all of you.

XIV.

The day I arrived here in Canton on a warm August afternoon, I had a guitar, a stereo, my clothes, and a 3/4 ton Chevy van out of which I had been living for almost two years (this was before "van living" was cool) but the engine blew in the van just as I pulled in the driveway of the manse. Beyond those material possessions, pulling in the driveway right behind me in a tan Saturn wagon, was my new wife, Linda, and a new 5 year old daughter, Nicole. At that point, it was all theory for us as to what this new family, new church, and new life would be like, and Linda and I spent a great deal of time imagining, considering, and contemplating a future here in Canton in the abstract. A week ago Friday, after 19 hours of grueling radio silence, we got the call from Nicole telling us we were grandparents to a 10 lb. whopper of a grandson, Alistair. Then, in the background, we heard Aly crying and Linda and I both started to weep.

XV.

In that moment the distance between the comprehensive but abstract life we had imagined and all the practical things we have done and undergone in those 26 years which became our actual lives together, collapsed into a moment of revelation. In the blink of an eye lasting a quarter century our family had been transformed by God through *this church*. We came here with almost nothing and, now, you have given us just about everything. With all our heart we thank you, and all those who came before you.

While it is important and, to a certain degree, fun to contemplate and consider the theory, we only *truly* figure out and understand the Transfiguration of Christ, as we, ourselves, are transformed by the body of Christ which is the Church. Over the span of our time here in Canton I have come to know more and more about less and less such that, now, I am sure about just a few things. One of them is the revelatory power of the *this church* to transform lives in dazzling and glorious fashion. *My* life, and *your* life. Amen.