

February 7, 2016 - Transfiguration Sunday

“I’m Beginning to See the Light” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43

The Transfiguration is one of the great mysteries of Jesus’ life. Perhaps the greatest mystery in the moment when Jesus is lifted into the sky and surrounded by piercing light between Moses and Elijah is what it means for us. I believe (a belief supported by the tradition of the history of the church) Jesus is showing us that he is the fulfillment of all that has gone before him, and Jesus at the same time is showing us what we are becoming through the incorporation of Christ into our lives.

The Protestant church has a habit of depersonalizing the stories of Jesus. The stories are about someone with whom we will never be like, about a person who does things we will never do. Protestants are practical, down-to-earth, and profoundly disturbed by the suggestion that there might be something mystical going on in their faith world. Maybe I am projecting saying that, but it seems that way to me, because if we were to fully inhabit what is going on in the mysteries of Christ, we would be utterly transformed, transfigured, transmuted in the way Jesus is showing us today.

A transfiguration is, as Paul puts it today, the movement of the soul and spirit from one degree or order of experience and life to another. Paul says it this way:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

It is important to realize this is happening to us and because of the choices we have made. Paul is telling us to become aware and conscious of the transformation we are experiencing in our lives with Christ.

In the church calendar, Transfiguration Sunday represents either the end of Epiphany - which is a time of light and revelation, or the beginning of Lent - a time of transformation through repentance, prayer and reflection. Let us treat Jesus’ Transfiguration as the beginning of Lent, as the beginning of a personal transformation within us culminating in Easter Sunday, in Resurrection. By doing so, I am asking you, good Protestant Congregationalists that you are, to engage in a mystical understanding of Jesus’ Transfiguration and your Lenten process.

To that end, let us consider three aspects to Jesus’ Transfiguration and how it concerns us:

- 1. Jesus radiates the light of God for our benefit***
- 2. The Light of Christ is a creative force which makes us aware of our ‘shadow’ and the world’s darkness***
- 3. We are being changed by our witnessing of the Light of Christ***

First: ***Jesus radiates the light of God for our benefit.***

There is no reason for Jesus to do this by himself. This is why he brings Peter, James and John with him up the mountain. They are Jesus' witnesses to the event. The light alters how the three disciples see Jesus' face in the same way being in the presence of God alters Moses' face. Then, when Moses presented the Law of God to the people of God, there was a veil that covered Moses' face. Paul uses that image as an analogy for how people used to approach God - as if through a veil. Paul is also speaking of the temple, where access to the Holy of Holies was behind a curtain and reserved only for the Levite priests. The priests, and Moses, were thus intermediaries between the people of God and the presence of God. At Jesus' death, according to the Gospel of Matthew,

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. (Matthew 27:51)

With Jesus' sacrifice, there is no longer a barrier between the presence of God and the people of God.

In the Transfiguration, Jesus does not veil himself and Peter, James and John bear witness to the full light of God radiating from Jesus, just as we bear witness to that light. Jesus talks to Moses and Elijah, who are, in a mystical sense, representatives of the Law, the past, and prophecy, the future. In between them, in the present moment, is Jesus. In the excitement, the three disciples become very tired, then very awake. In their wakefulness, in their full consciousness, they see what Paul speaks about - the transformation into the same image from one degree of glory to another. "...*they saw his glory*", Scripture tells us.

Why is the Light of Christ for our benefit? All of us have a vision of who we would like to be in our lives and in our relationships. We all want to radiate our true selves to others. Here, Jesus shows us who we are becoming when we choose to follow him. What Jesus has done, we will do. Who Jesus was, we are becoming. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the disciples,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

Second: ***The Light of Christ is a creative force in our lives which makes us aware of our 'shadow' and the world's darkness.***

The Light of Christ is a recasting of the first light of creation. God's first act was to create light. It is only with the presence of light that darkness can exist. There is a strong suggestion in the New Testament, and particularly the Gospel of John, that we can only know the presence of sin and evil because of the presence of Christ. Or to put it another way, it is only when Christ is present that we are truly aware of the shadows of self and the darkness of evil in the world. This is why we get these dualities whenever we hear of the mysteries of Christ. Remember, the mysteries of Jesus Christ are identified whenever God speaks to those who are in the presence of Christ - at Jesus' baptism, at his Transfiguration, and on the Cross.

Today, God says to Peter, James and John,

"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

Then, the story says an interesting thing. It says,

“And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.”

When we *listen to God*, we are *alone with Jesus*. We begin to know things about God, about Jesus, about the past and the present, about the human and the divine, about the body and the spirit, about who we are and who we are not.

Sometimes, what we come to know is our personal darkness, our personal barriers to God and relationships, and also the world’s darkness. Peter, when he sees the light radiating from Jesus in his transfigured state, immediately wants to stay where he is.

“Let us make three tents, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

He doesn’t know what he is saying. I think Peter is confronted with his deepest fears and desires here. He, and the other disciples, are then engulfed in a cloud.

Some of you, I know, have had profound spiritual experiences. If you are like me, rather than being a great and happy experience, my immediate experience of some of those insights was one of immediately being aware that I don’t really know what is going on and what I thought was true from before is now shown to be false, unfounded, unreal. It is like walking into a cloud, a cloud of unknowing, as the mystics of the Middle Ages used to call it.

The cloud of unknowing, the questioning of the soul, being confronted with our fears and our darkest desires - all these are an indication of the presence of the light of Christ. We cannot know the one without the other. The darkness, the cloudiness, becoming heavy with sleep are all indicators to do what God tells the disciples -

*“This is my Son; **listen to Him!**”*

Thirdly: ***We are changed by our witness to the light of Christ.***

Now that we have borne witness to the light of Christ and understood that it radiates for our benefit, and in the presence of that light we begin to see all the places where our lives and the world are darkened to that light, we begin the process of our own Transfiguration. We are changed by the experience of bearing witness to the light of Christ.

Peter, James and John now know something very powerful that they did not know. Their whole understanding of their tradition and faith has been transformed by what they saw on the mountain. Their whole understanding of the future, their future, has been altered and reframed by seeing Jesus raised from one degree of glory to another. The question is, do they believe this to be true of themselves as well? Do you believe it to be true of yourself? That we are, by our relationship with Jesus Christ, being raised from one degree of glory to another?

When John the Baptist awaited Jesus by the shores of the Jordan River, he said,

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11)

As the fire of transfiguration and transformation is lit within us, we become aware of those aspects of ourselves that are weighed down, leaden, unpurified and unreconciled to the Lord. Fire melts, burns, blackens, turns to ash all these things. The fire of Christ’s light is a difficult process to engage because we are entering into a conscious and clarified life in relationship to the light of Christ which shines for you and for me.

The process of being transfigured by the light of Christ is why the disciples do not talk about their experience. The story says,

“And silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen”

when they came off the mountain with Jesus. If you are like me and have had a powerful spiritual experience, it often leaves me feeling like a ‘very small animal’, vulnerable and cautious and a little fragile. There is good reason for this. Anything Peter, James and John say will reflect back on what they now know about themselves and Christ. For now, their worldviews have been radically altered. They, like us, are in the process of becoming.

‘Very small animals’ in such a time can also have adventures, it is just that who they know themselves to be is changing. I use, as my proof of such a statement, Piglet from the Winnie the Pooh stories. Piglet is charged with being front and center in a plan to kidnap Baby Roo from Kanga. In the midst of the planning, Piglet says,

"There's just one thing," said Piglet, fidgeting a bit. "I was talking to Christopher Robin, and he said that a Kanga was Generally Regarded as One of the Fiercer Animals I am not frightened of Fierce Animals in the ordinary way, but it is well known that if One of the Fiercer Animals is Deprived of Its Young, it becomes as fierce as Two of the Fiercer Animals. In which case 'Aha!' is perhaps a foolish thing to say."

"Piglet," said Rabbit, taking out a pencil, and licking the end of it, "you haven't any pluck."

"It is hard to be brave," said Piglet, sniffing slightly, "when you're only a Very Small Animal."

Rabbit, who had begun to write very busily, looked up and said:

"It is because you are a very small animal that you will be Useful in the adventure before us."

Piglet was so excited at the idea of being Useful that he forgot to be frightened any more, and when Rabbit went on to say that Kangas were only Fierce during the winter months, being at other times of an Affectionate Disposition, he could hardly sit still, he was so eager to begin being useful at once. (Winnie the Pooh, by AA Milne. accessed at <https://www.acc.umu.se/~coppelia/pooh/stories/ch7.html>. 2/5/2016)

Even though we are being transfigured, even though we are unsure of who we are becoming in the light of Christ, even though we are fragile, feel small in the immensity of God’s light and creation, we are Useful to the Lord. We are becoming like Christ, and we are beginning to radiate with the same light. We are beginning to see the light and it is the light of God shining for and through each of us.

Amen.