

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2018,
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A photographer goes to a haunted castle determined to get a picture of a ghost on Halloween. The ghost he encounters turns out to be friendly and poses for a snapshot. The happy photographer later downloads his photos and finds that the photos are underexposed and completely blank. Moral of the story: The spirit is willing, but the flash is weak.¹

This morning we hear the story of the work of the Spirit in transfiguring Christ while he is on the mountaintop with some of his disciples. This is key for us, a footnote in the lectionary during Epiphany to remind us that we have reached the last Sunday of this particular liturgical season, as every year on the Sunday before the beginning of Lent we hear this tale. It's one of the few times we will hear the same gospel story twice for the same event, as in most churches, August 6 is The Feast of the Transfiguration and uses identical lessons. Today the purpose of telling of Jesus' transfiguration is to ready us for Lent, where, if all goes well and we dedicate ourselves to a good 47 days, we will be transformed by the experience and arrive wholly new and other on Easter morning.

The gospel lesson from Mark has kind of a superhero quality about it: the one with all the power, all the authority goes with his suspecting or perhaps unsuspecting friends to a secret high faraway place where they encounter other superheroes or demigods of their history who convene to receive the message/charge from their creator, while the main hero gets a new costume and a new persona and comes out on the other side of the event changed and ready and willing to confront the evils of the world. Many Marvel comics have this transfiguration theme (Iron Man, Thor, etc.), so it is not new to us. It's the players in this comic-strip like event that are important. You have Elijah and Moses, both who were taken up by God, or "assumed" into heaven; they did not die, as far as we know, or they were in kind of a limbo where they could be sent back to earth by God as precursors of the end times, warning the world and its leaders that the apocalypse was near. Hence whatever they had to say would be of utmost importance, and the fact that they were in conversation with Jesus and present when God makes a Divine pronouncement meant that the hearers of the story(us included) best sit up, listen, and pay close attention.

Peter tries to make sense of what he sees and offers to set up three booths for Elijah, Moses, and Jesus. This was because there was a longstanding tradition that the end of the world, or at least, the world as we know it, would come about during the Jewish Feast of the Booths or Tabernacles called Sukkot. But it appears Peter's efforts are not necessary, as God has other plans. This promotes the question, of course, is Jesus an apocalyptic figure and is his coming

into the world and the breaking in of God's kingdom that he professes mean that we are in the end times? There are many churches who would say so, despite the 2000 years we have yet been waiting (since God's time is not our time, and a millennium of time is like a second in God's existence. We must be prepared, say the members of the 7th day and other churches, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, for whatever God has planned. Certainly, they believe and preach, God has a plan, and it includes great works in the end days, so we must be ever-vigilant.) Hence the Transfiguration event that we take note of today is, for many, the marker of the end of days. What does the end of days look like, you may ask? It looks like today; we must look for the signs, and interpret them. Given the political and economic disarray we find ourselves in this week, the end might be a lot nearer than we might think or imagine!

But let that not keep us from our story, and one of its main components, that of the dazzling white raiment Jesus is transformed by. It is meant to remind us of the glory of the Lord. In other words it is here that the disciples and those who listened and learned from Mark's gospel, whom we call the "Marcan Church," came to first understand who it is that Jesus was for them, the son of Man as recounted in the book of Daniel, the one who was coming to convert and transform and save a nation of oppressed Jews, and by extension, Gentile believers also. Despite the Messianic secret we've been learning about for the last five weeks, this morning's Gospel gives us the biggest hint yet, albeit early on, just who it is we are dealing with. This is God's Son - - we should believe in him, and listen to what he has to say. Oh how wide-eyed the first to hear of this vision must have been. Now, if only they would believe, having not seen for themselves. But the word was out. The Jesus they first encountered was new, was different, was changed somehow. And that transformation, once realized and inculcated, would change the believer and non believer alike. It had to be true; just hearing the story, they could tell that something was different, and that their lives were about to change as well.ⁱⁱ

Some people refer to this as their mountain-top experience. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke about this in his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. I'm not sure if it was any particular experience that he was speaking of, other than perhaps being in jail or the entire civil rights movement itself. He was obviously transformed by his deep family roots in the African-American Baptist church, his formative experiences in his hometown of Atlanta, his theological studies, his varied models of religious and political leadership, and his extensive network of contacts in the peace and social justice movements of his time. In that famous speech, given on the night before he was assassinated, he said "I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine

eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”ⁱⁱⁱ Less than twelve hours later, he was dead at the hand of James Earl Ray. Perhaps like Jesus, he had seen and done all he had been called to do; what remained was to climb the mountain once again, this time to be with God, and to hear the final pronouncement “in him am I well pleased.”

I don't know if you've ever had a mountain top experience yourself. I was reading on one sermon site of “the true story of a 33-year-old truck driver by the name of Larry Walters who was sitting in his lawn chair in his backyard one day wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember he had wanted to fly but he had never had the time nor money nor opportunity to be a pilot. Hang gliding was out because there was no good place for gliding near his home. So he spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his backyard in his ordinary old aluminum chair – the kind with the webbing and the rivets, the kind most of us have. One day Larry hooked 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB-gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down. He lifted off in his lawn chair expecting to climb a couple of hundred feet over his neighborhood. But instead he shot up 11,000 feet right through the approach corridor to the Los Angeles International Airport. When asked by the press why he did it, Larry answered: “Well, you can't just sit there.” When asked if he was scared, he answered, “Yes...wonderfully so.” Wow! Larry Walters will never be the same again after his trip to the mountain in his lawn chair. He has seen things and felt things that will shape the way he lives the rest of his life.”^{iv}

Some folks have their mountain top experience late in life. The writer and preacher David Leininger writes about his work in hospice and the many near-death or at death experiences the over 300 patients he has worked with have gone through. Some folks talk about going towards a bright light; some report a visit from Jesus or long-gone family members. Others speak about seeing a baby lying in bed with them; not just women, but men also. Almost all relate breaking the veil between this life and the next.^v So perhaps the reason we have not had our own mountaintop experience is a good thing - - we've never been that close to death. Though I can tell you I've been with many people when they are dying, and seen and heard some pretty incredible things. I can recall when my good friend Peter died and I was in the room. He kept on looking up into the corner of the room saying he could see a light. When he died the room smelt like roses. For days. His wife tells me every once in a while she will walk into the room where he died and there is still strong odor of rosewater that wafts in the air, refusing to settle down, as if some wind were carrying it around to touch the corners of the walls and windows. Some saints were said to have an *odor of sanctity*, where their body smelled like roses long after they died. Maybe the mountaintop, or some mountaintops, are covered in roses.

Yet until we know for sure that the gospel for this morning was meant to be more than metaphor, we might not want to take it at face value, as there is a lot that is inferred by merely hearing the story and seeing how it might apply to us today. Leininger has suggestions of what the Transfiguration can mean. Rather than only knowing that life has its transformations and

we should pay attention to them (which is a good thing), and that transfiguration is about the change in the *figura*, or face, hence a change in vision and attitude, it would be good if we can see the event as a simile, so that we might have about us an air of “joyous expectancy.” He says when you come to church from week to week, “prayerfully begin your trip through the doors ready, not to run into someone you would rather not see, not to sing a hymn you don’t know and would rather not learn, not to mumble through a prayer... without thought, not to suffer through a sermon that somehow misses you. No. Rather come in ready to meet [the Christ]...in a person, a song, a word. The older I get the more I realize that ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING. When the ATTITUDE is right, then the invitation can come and be received with the joy it deserves”^{vi}and we will be transformed, transfigured, lifted up, changed and ready to meet the challenges of life and death, however close we are to either one or both!

Yet there are those who wish to be left alone, who say, “what have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? We know your name – leave us. We do not want to be different, we don’t want a transformation, we are weary and fearful of change. “For them I found this old Irish prayer, which you may be familiar with. It says,

May God bless those who love us.
And for those who don't love us, may God turn their hearts.
And for those whose hearts cannot be turned,
May God turn their ankles
So that we may know them by their limping.^{vii}

Just remember, “Everything is change,” and on this winter day, be warmed by that reality.

Amen.

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ⁱ <https://unijokes.com/jokes-about-life/>

ⁱⁱ For the outline of this portion of my sermon, I am indebted to Sarah Henrich @http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1202

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/mark-92-9-wow-leininger/>

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} <http://www.cowart.info/Cool%20Stuff%20I%20like/jokes/Jokes.html>