

SLD02.03.08 Transfiguration
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 17:1-8, 2 Peter 1:16-21
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“Until the day dawns....”

So you’ve just heard Jacob read the story of Jesus’ Transfiguration. In a minute we’ll hear 2 Peter’s commentary on it. But before we do, let’s spend a little time recapping what happens on that mountain where Jesus gets transfigured, and what it likely means for the first hearers of this story.

As all the synoptics tell it, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray and suddenly becomes “transfigured before them.” That is, “his face shines like the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white.” So white, it’s noted in Mark’s version, that no one on earth could possibly have bleached them. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appear and engage in conversation with Jesus. Whereupon Peter jumps in with his offer to build three huts, God jumps in to tell Peter to hush, the disciples freak, Jesus comforts them, Moses and Elijah disappear, and down Jesus and the disciples come off the mountain.

Now, to understand what this story may have meant to its first listeners, it might be helpful to know that it was written somewhere around 90 years after Jesus’ death, at a point when many changes and challenges had occurred in the Christian community. For one thing, by now Jewish Christians have pretty well distanced themselves from their original synagogue community, and vice versa. So one of Matthew’s goals in writing his gospel is to provide his Jewish Christian community with an alternative to traditional rabbinic instruction, a trustworthy substitute source of religious guidance that is

independent of the Torah.¹ And not just an *equal* alternative, mind you, but a *superior* one, a point not very subtly reinforced in the Transfiguration story by Moses and Elijah first appearing on the mountain with Jesus to establish him as a peer of Judaism's Great Ones, and then *disappearing*, leaving only Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophets and God's final testament.

Another issue going on in the church right about the time the Transfiguration story is penned is a sort of general discomfort about the delay of the Parousia, the Second Coming of Jesus – you know, the apocalypse, when the world is supposed to end and everything be transformed and believers ascend to Jesus in heaven.

Well, Jesus had preached it so his disciples had expected it - in their lifetimes. Unfortunately, much to the embarrassment of Christians in their now predominantly pagan, and skeptical, cultural environment, the apocalypse never occurred.² The much anticipated, and advertised, Second Coming never came!

So another way in which Jesus' Transfiguration story might have served Matthew's community was as a reminder of Jesus' favor with God (his face shining like Moses' on Mt. Sinai, and God's command, "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!"), and as a reinforcement of Jesus' eventual coming as the Resurrected One (his "be not afraid" behavior and language striking similar to the resurrection appearances that would come later.) The Second Coming may not have come *yet*, the Transfiguration story seems to say, but rest assured, it'll be here before long.

Establishing Jesus' premier prophetic role and reassuring his followers of his eventual return is what the Transfiguration may have meant to Matthew's first listeners.

¹ Harper's Bible Commentary, James L. Mays, Ed., Harper and Row, 1988, "Matthew," Reginald Fuller, p. 951.

² *Ibid.* p. 1286.

What it more often means to reformed preachers today is, “uh oh, here we go again. It’s Transfiguration Sunday when we either have to dip into mystery and mysticism, which has precious little place in the Reformed tradition, or give a heady history lesson that doesn’t mean much to anybody and hardly addresses the luminous complexity of the text.”

Myself, I usually go with the mystery and mysticism. Well, not usually, always, I guess, since truth is, I’m not sure I have more than one Transfiguration sermon in me. And the one I preach is about the awe and mystery and danger of the presence of God. You know, the one where I make fun of Peter a lot (he’s such an easy target) but then point out how all us disciples of Jesus Christ, maybe especially us Presbyterians, seem a little clumsy before the mystery and majesty of God.

Then I quote Annie Dillard in her book, Holy The Firm, where she remarks that “the higher Christian churches (that’s us)....come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism...as though we know what we’re doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. / often think,” says Dillard, “of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. ...If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches (think Holiness, Pentecostal or primitive Baptist) you expect it any minute. Which, Dillard suggests, “is the beginning of wisdom.” (p.59)

So the way I usually (okay, always) preach Transfiguration is as a kind of heads-up to the majestic, transformative “otherness” of our too-often-domesticated God.

Only there’s just so many times you can get away with preaching the same sermon in the same church, never mind that even / can’t remember what I said last week. So while I couldn’t resist getting that heads-up about God’s inscrutable, untameable otherness in there

somewhere, this year I decided to spend more time with one of lectionary's "other" Transfiguration texts, with II Peter, to see what insight *it* might have to offer us regarding our annual DayGlo® Jesus.

From the tone of Peter's opening words, you get the feeling maybe he's tried all the other arguments to convince his listeners of the veracity of his Transfiguration story: Like – notice how Jesus' face lights up when he's with God. Remind you of anyone else? Like Moses up on Sinai? Huh?

And then Moses and Elijah both show up on the mountain there with us. How 'bout that? Guess Jesus pretty much ranks with the Greats, huh. But what about Moses and Elijah disappearing and Jesus sticking around. I'd say that means Jesus rules, wouldn't you?

Peter's listeners still look puzzled. And what 'bout how scared the disciples get when they see Jesus' face, and how he comforts them and says "do not be afraid." Doesn't that sound an awful lot like later when Jesus talks about dying and coming back? He *is* coming back, you know.

Those listening to Peter nod in half-hearted agreement. Frankly, the story's just too weird.

Peter gets impatient.

2 Peter 1:16-21. Look, it's not like we just followed some *cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* James, John and I, we were there! We were **eyewitnesses** of Jesus' majesty.

*We actually **saw** (Jesus) receive honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'* We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with Jesus on that holy mountain.

But for all his arguments and assertions, Peter observes the story of Jesus' Transfiguration making no more sense in the telling than it did to him in the experiencing.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay, so maybe the whole Jesus lighting up amid prophetic poltergeists is hard to swallow. But I was there and I saw it – we all did. So for us *the prophetic message is more fully confirmed.*”

Maybe you don’t understand it; heck, *I don’t understand it*, but *you’d do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (II Peter 1:19b-21)*

Pay attention to what we’re saying, Peter pleads. Maybe you didn’t see Jesus’ Transfiguration, maybe you didn’t hear God’s voice, but we did. And we’re telling you, until you get Jesus’ transforming power and presence for yourself, you’d do well to take our word for it. And not just because we say so but because it’ll help you. It’ll help you find your way in the darkness.

In fact, pay attention to our witness the way you’d pay attention to a lamp shining in the dark. Maybe it *is* just a glimmer but let it catch your eye. Let it attract you. Because sooner or later, if you do that, if you keep your eye on that glimmer, and maybe inch a little closer to it, it’s likely to get bigger and clearer until you’re finally able to confirm it for yourself.

What’s more, if you move toward even the faintest glimmer of Jesus Christ, chances are that glimmer’ll start moving toward you – because it’s not from us, you know. It’s from the Holy Spirit. Sooner or later that’s going to dawn on you. Sooner or later that morning star will rise in your own heart.”

Last week you and I heard Matthew borrow Isaiah's words to describe Jesus as a great light for us who sit in darkness. Last week we were talking moths and flames, and risking the attraction, the danger, even the death, offered by that flame.

This week, it's a different message. This week, Jesus' face glows in a mysterious manner from waaay at distance, way atop a mountain. He's still a Light, still shining in his disciples' darkness, but no longer that fiercesome flame that aims to destroy, and transform, whatever comes near. This week the light of Jesus is softer, fainter, more subtle, maybe even receding a bit, just the frailest glimmer sent to catch our dimming eye.

What's changed? Did the room get darker? Did our eyesight blur? Or the flame flicker out? Or is it just the nearing season of Lent that's dampening the brightness of our distant, saving Lord? The coming shadow of Lent, during which the darkness only gets darker as we contemplate both Jesus' death, and our own. The inexorable season of Lent, when we walk together through that valley of the shadow, only to find Gethemene at the other end.

With the hard by season of Lent approaching, Peter issues only the gentlest of dares to Jesus' disciples - no cataclysmic kamikaze flame diving, now. No insistent interpretations of great cosmic mysteries. No dramatic revelatory events cum talking clouds and holy ghosts. Just the gentlest suggestion that we attend to even the merest glimmer of Jesus' light. Look for even the faintest glow, and pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place. For with time, discipline, spiritual practice, or maybe even just trust and faith, that light might grow. It might even draw us toward it. Or, draw itself towards us.

Who knows? If God's "otherness" is the beginning of wisdom, maybe God's intimate immanence is wisdom's end. One thing's for sure, in the approaching darkness of

Lent, you and I will need all the light we can get. Forty days is a long time to wait for the day to dawn, for that morning star, to rise in our hearts. So I stand with Peter on this one – we'd do well to be attentive during the coming season to whatever hint of Christ's light that we come across, as to a lamp shining in a dark place.

To the glory of God. Amen.