

## REALLY?! DID THAT REALLY HAPPEN?

Whenever I read a biblical passage like this one of Jesus' Transfiguration, one that involves some sort of supernatural happening, my first reaction is usually, "C'mon, really?! Jesus and a few of his disciples head up the mountain to pray when all of the sudden his face and clothes somehow change, and then the next thing we know he is shooting the breeze with Moses and Elijah? And as if that is not enough, a cloud rolls in and God begins to speak from it?"

Our scientifically trained minds have a difficult time swallowing what sometimes sound like tall tales in the Bible. Now some will tell us that our faith in Jesus and God is somehow smaller if we do not literally believe that biblical accounts, like the Transfiguration, occurred exactly as written. I do not hold that view. Faith is not built upon, or limited by, intellectual conformity to a 2,000 year old worldview. Faith is built upon and grown in relationship with God in conversation with our scriptural and religious tradition. That said, I also believe that there are things in life that we cannot explain, events for which science has no rationalization, moments of the Holy breaking in and around us, miracles to which we are witnesses, *if* we have eyes to see.

But often we do not see the holy and miraculous. We—myself included—have a tendency to either dismiss outright or work hard to come up with a logical explanation when the holy or miraculous does appear. The Transfiguration is one such scripture that is easy to dismiss or explain away. After all, magically changed faces and clothes, the long-dead having a meeting of the minds with the Messiah, and a God-speaking cloud are not only out of our experience but out of this world as we know it.

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## DISMISSING AND EXPLAINING...

Dismissal of this scripture would be easy. People's clothes do not suddenly turn "dazzling white", the dead do not appear and have conversations with the living, and when was the last time you heard God speak from the clouds? Anybody who believes these things is delusional.

But let's say we wanted to hang in there a bit longer and give the scripture a chance. Logical and biblical analysis could give some reasons for how something like this may have happened, or at least why it was written the way it was and how that writing would have been interpreted. We could probe the culture of the time, and the ways in which biblical writers interpreted and wrote about their experiences, and their understanding of their religious tradition and the divine. In fact, this is usually how I go about uncovering meaning from scripture and preparing a sermon. This scripture would be rich for such an analysis.

A study could begin with what on earth "transfigured" means. Maybe explore the difference between transfiguration and transformation, transfiguration focusing more on a change in

appearance. The analysis would weigh why Luke uses a different Greek word than Matthew and Mark for what is translated as “transfigure.” Matthew and Mark use the same root word that gives us words for permanent change like metamorphosis (*metamorpho*tha), while Luke uses words that imply a change in appearance (*engeneto...heteron*)

A study would include some research into why an event like this would prove Jesus’ credibility: he encounters God much like Moses did on another mountain. And not only that, but he talks with Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest Israelite leaders ever, each representing the two pillars of scriptural tradition, the Law and the Prophets. But then Jesus surpasses both Moses and Elijah when God endorses him from a cloud. There would be parallels drawn to the tradition held by some at the time that Elijah was the fore-runner to the Messiah perhaps even returning as the Messiah himself. Or, how Jesus could be viewed as the new Moses, leading an even greater Exodus than that of the Israelites escaping Egypt and finding the Promised Land.

That analysis might conclude that this was a symbolic rendering to exhibit Jesus’ authority, closeness to God, and endorsement of his journey to Jerusalem. This analysis wouldn’t take anything away from Jesus, who he was or what he did, but the explanation would help us put this in some framework of understanding in order to give this scripture meaning today.

Whew...that is a lot of good and interesting material for a sermon. But I’m not going to go much deeper into any of those topics. This morning I am not primarily interested in either explaining or dismissing this Transfiguration event. Instead I want to ask, *What if this happened to you, or us, today?* What if you stumbled over an experience with the holy or miraculous on your way out to the parking lot, or it fell in your lap at home a little later (Lord knows it probably wouldn’t happen in worship☺)? Would you dismiss it, explain it away, or would you have eyes to see it?

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## EYES TO SEE

Since we live in a world where we think we are largely removed from the everyday human encounter with the divine, I don’t blame us for dismissing and explaining. We explain because we are meaning-making creatures and so we try to make meaning out of the things that have happened to us. We crave a framework to describe and define, and that is okay (that is what the writers of scripture did much of the time). Professor, author and nun, Elizabeth Liebert, says it well: “...we humans notice what we are looking for...and also overlook what we don’t expect, somehow don’t want to see, or don’t have any criteria for interpreting.”<sup>1</sup>

But...there also comes a time when we have an encounter that is so real that we cannot dismiss it. A time when the explanations cannot capture the experience, a time when as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: “[We] have had enough explanations – the careful process of mounting

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

dead butterflies on pins. [We] want to come face to face with the real thing.” A time when we are ready for a face to face experience with the “living God.”<sup>2</sup>

And come face to face we do. We know this from our own encounters. Some time or other, I believe we will all have some numinous, mystical, holy encounter. We might hear a voice that calms what had been an all-encompassing fear. Perhaps sense that we ought to be in touch with someone by phone or visit and it turns out that they needed us more than we knew. Or even when we are witness to the miracle of life, and the indelible bond of love as we saw so clearly with the Burkes in parent child dedication this morning. Yes, we do see the holy. But what then? Will we see transfiguration and be transformed or remain untransformed?

I love Peter’s reaction in the scripture. First he wants to have a party—he wants to mark the occasion like the Jewish Feast of Booths, a harvest holiday and tradition that celebrates wandering in the wilderness. But then in the end, he is awestruck and without words. “The Transfiguration took place during an experience of private meditation and prayer not during a public speech or one of Jesus’ tutorials to his disciples. It was an intensely personal experience. While words may fail us after such a profound event, a genuine, spiritual experience can easily withstand our own inability to understand it.”<sup>3</sup> We cannot bottle up these holy moments and save them for later, as Peter tried to do. And we need not “talk an experience out” in order to make it real. Sometimes--maybe even especially--when we encounter God the best things we can do is to say nothing.

As real as those experiences are with the divine, they are often fleeting. For this Sister Liebert has some wisdom: just as we overlook that which we do not expect “The corollary may be equally enlightening: the more we look, the more we will see, the more we see the more we will look for. This psychological truth points to an underlying spiritual reality...Seeing God’s action in our lives gives us eyes to see that divine action even more frequently.”<sup>4</sup>

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## TRANSFIGURED AND TRANSFORMED?

We can dismiss the experiences in our lives that we cannot make sense of, spend our days trying to explain the inexplicable, or we can accept them for what they are: a gift. What if we had eyes to see and ears to hear again and again? And then what if we were willing to be transformed by what we saw and heard?

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<sup>2</sup> Home by Another Way, Barbara Brown Taylor

<sup>3</sup> *Homiletics Magazine*, author unattributed.

<sup>4</sup> *Changing life patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, Elizabeth Liebert, pp 10-11. Chalice Press, 2000.

The transfiguration was a mystical experience for the disciples. It prepared them for the walking with Jesus to the end of the road, Jerusalem. A way that would involve sacrifice and suffering. But in this mystical moment on a mountain they are given some reassurance, that what would appear to be the final word would not be the final word. In this way the transfiguration exhibits the grace and compassion that was to be revealed. This would be an experience the disciples could draw upon when Jesus shook their foundations on the way to Jerusalem, then the core of Jerusalem's religious and political foundations. This experience would be a reservoir of faith in difficult times. And these experiences will do the same for each of us...if we dare to have eyes to see.