

February 23, 2020 Transfiguration Sunday
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GOSPEL

Matthew 17:1-9

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the seventeenth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

It is Transfiguration Sunday...
a day that, I'll be honest,
hasn't often moved me the way so many others do.
All Saints Sunday - I feel in my guts.
Christ the King Sunday burns my heart.
Easter is overflowing joy...
Christmas a pensive mystery.

Transfiguration Sunday is...perplexing.

What we even mean by this word is only the beginning of the perplexity.

Transfigure.

That prefix "trans" - it means "on the other side" ...

It tells us about the crossing of a boundary.

Often, these days, we may hear this prefix and think of us
whose experience and identity draws us across the boundaries
of how we have constructed gender.

Yet, there are so so many words that show us how boundary crossings
like the one we celebrate today can be both beautiful and dangerous:

transpose... transport... transmit...

translate... transcend... transfuse... transgress.

Every boundary crossing is a risk...

What will happen to the music in a new key?

Will the words make sense in another language?

What will happen when we step over the line?

What will happen when we see Jesus in a new way?

Today the very boundary of Jesus' physical body is crossed...

He is transfigured.

But...and this is where this perplexing day

found it's way into my heart this year...

I don't think the Transfiguration of Jesus

is something we see and have to make sense of.

We don't just get to puzzle over how Jesus is changed.

Because I don't think he's the only one.

Because crossing a boundary doesn't only change the one
who does the crossing.

Jesus goes up the mountain and brings Peter, James, and John with him.

And up there - away from everything and everyone else –
these three followers and friends are witnesses as Jesus changes –
truly changes.

And that changes them, too.

That doesn't mean we've unraveled the perplexity yet, though...

Because even if we know what translations and transfusions are...
I'm not sure we know what transfiguration is.

It's an odd word to our thinking.

We've talked about that prefix – the “trans-ness” of it.

But what does it really mean?

Well...maybe you know more Greek than you realize...

and maybe the original word can help us.

In the original text, the word is μεταμορφώθη (metamorphothe).

This is a metamorphosis.

Crossing the boundary from one state or stage to another...

not becoming a new thing entirely...

but also completely changing.

Like the caterpillar that becomes a butterfly.

It is still itself...but it is also unrecognizably different.

This word only appears in 3 other places in the Christian Testament.

Another time is in Mark's description of this same event.

Then, twice, it is used by Paul –

in Romans (12:2) and Second Corinthians (3:18).

I sort of wish the composers of the lectionary

had given us Second Corinthians today...

so we could hear side by side the telling of Jesus' transfiguration...

with what Paul writes in this letter.

Because what he describes

is the transfiguration that *Moses* experienced

on the mountain with God...

which made his face shine so brightly
that he had to wear a veil over it
to keep from overwhelming and frightening the people.

Paul compares this transfiguration of Moses to what happens to all of us
as we come to know Jesus.

Paul writes: "And all of us, with unveiled faces,
seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror,
are being transformed into the same image
from one degree of glory to another;
for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

Transfiguration, according to Paul,
is not just something that happens to Jesus...
and it is not just something that the lucky chosen few get to witness...

It is also something that happens to us.

Dr. Cory Driver points out in his commentary on Matthew for today
that Jesus could just as easily have gone up the mountain alone
to have this mystical communion with the ancestors in faith –
Elijah and Moses.

But he chose to bring witnesses.

Peter and James and John were meant to see this...
perplexing as it is.

Because it wasn't only going to change Jesus
in a temporary, fantastic sort of way...
It was also going to change them.

It wasn't only going to change Jesus...
It was also going to change them...
It is also going to change us.

And Jesus tells them to keep this change, this mystery hidden for a time...

to let it work on their hearts....
because the change won't be complete
until the final boundary is crossed...
until Jesus goes to the cross and tomb...
and returns so that the final boundary won't hold us, either.
But the change began in a new way on this day,
because one thing is for sure –
they did not go back down the mountain the same.

Even if, for now, the transfiguration was hidden inside them.
Going down the mountain,
the whole world became the chrysalis...
where the disciples were changing...
where everything was changing.

I've never been on the inside of a chrysalis...
but I imagine it's actually a pretty terrifying place to be.
Everything is dissolving, reorienting...
It is vulnerable...
Once the transfiguration begins, you can't defend yourself...
you can only let it keep working until it is done.
You have to wait...weak and in the darkness...
suspended between what you've left behind and where you are going.

Perhaps the church's entire existence is a chrysalis for the new creation.

So today, we stand at the threshold of Lent...
we stand at the threshold of the world's great transfiguration...
through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ...
It is a vulnerable, frightening place to be...at this boundary...
suspended between what we are and what we can become.

For this coming season, we put things aside sometimes...
fasting in some form or another.

We pray and repent...and live in love towards one another.

In our worship here,
we will put away the church's great word of celebration –
our "alleluias."

We won't be ready to say them again, maybe,
until we have emerged from the other side
of this great boundary-crossing season.

As we go down the mountain of transfiguration today,
it is as if the whole world is being spun up into its dark cocoon.
So we can continue becoming what we were born to be.

And Jesus continues to lead the way.
And the voice of God comes out of the heavens
as he is transfigured before us...
and speaks the same words that were spoken at his baptism:
"This is my Son, the beloved...with whom I am well pleased."

And a new coda is added.
A punctuation.
An edict to clarify what we need for the journey ahead.

"Listen to him," the voice says. "Listen to him."

If you need anything to hold onto
in the midst of the troubling and perplexing days...
the in-between, becoming time,
God gives us this extra word for our journey of boundary-crossing...
of transfiguration.

"Listen to him."
Let us fix our ears and eyes on Christ
and see where he leads us next.

Amen.