

The Dazzling Christ Who Refigures Us

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish
March 9-10, 2019
Transfiguration of Our Lord
Luke 9:28-36

Grace and Peace to you from our beautiful Savior, Jesus, who is miraculously holy. Mysteriously Other. Gloriously Beyond. And yet simultaneously intimate. Interconnected. And inclusive. Amen

Move 1: Introduction to Transfiguration

Every year, we shut the door to the season of Epiphany with the Transfiguration story. Since Christmas, we have heard one unexpected revelation after another. Hearing about Christ becoming more and more well know. The Realm of God becoming more and more proclaimed. The hiddenness in Jesus becoming more and more revealed.

From a shining star that awed and led the wise men to his bright aura wowing John the Baptist. To his illuminating message that his mission is to proclaim the good news to the poor and bring healing to the lost, vulnerable and neglected.[1]

Before we begin the season of Lent, we pause this weekend for one last time to focus on the unexpected light of Christ. That occurs on the mountaintop. On Mount Tabor, a diverse mountain marked by hills and valleys, fertile plains and barren desert, steep rocks and beautiful wilderness.[2]

While this story has other-worldly and magical elements to it, this mystical interaction all took place here on earth, at a real place, with disciples looking on, at a specific moment in human history.

Before we delve and dwell in the Word, I want to share a funny story.

Move 2: Dazzling white clothes

In college, I spent two years helping teach Confirmation at a nearby church in Princeton, Iowa. Small rural church on the river.

Each week I would teach the lesson, and I always sent the kids home with worksheets to continue to engage them and their families in the topics we had discussed in class.

One Wednesday, I was tasked with teaching the kids about the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. I shared about what a sight it must have been for the disciples to see

Jesus in dazzling white. I asked them to imagine a moment they felt absolutely peaceful. Filled with awe. What was that moment?

A hand shot up right away. I called on Daniel. And he shared, "It's like how I feel when I get to go home from Confirmation."

I couldn't help but laugh. I was obviously such a good teacher.

But he shared that he loved going home after Confirmation class because he got the opportunity to talk about what we learned with his younger brother. It was Daniel's favorite thing. To share what he'd learned. I thought that was cool.

What if we all felt the same way about worship? I mean, worship isn't a retreat *away* from the world. It's a retreat so we can *engage* the world. We worship to come back into the world changed. Renewed. Transformed, wanting to share the love we first receive in Christ.[3]

Worship is where we listen, receive, and encounter the glorious Savior. In real ways through the preached word, and in mysterious ways through the body and blood of Jesus that are in, with, and under the elements of the bread and wine. But we don't stay here. We leave renewed to serve. To share. We come down from the mountaintop to join in the messy world, which is where we know Christ already is present and working.

Well, that following Sunday after my lesson on the Transfiguration, Daniel came up and shared a funny story that happened at home.

Daniel had shared the story of Jesus' Transfiguration with his younger brother that night. The next day. Daniel woke up to his mom and dad scolding his younger brother. Daniel's brother had decided that he needed to make all his clothes dazzling white. He wanted to be like Jesus. So he used lots and lots of detergent to make his clothes bright and shiny.

Unfortunately, he used way too much, and the laundry room was filled with suds, water, and foam. His clothes had residue all over them. Ruined clothes. Ruined room.

But, Daniel said, his family will never forget the Transfiguration story.

The Transfiguration story is, of course, much more than Jesus using the high-efficiency, expensive Tide Pods on his clothes. This story is one that reveals Jesus' true self. A self that is breathtaking, wondrous, and beautiful. That affirms Jesus is the chosen one. The one true Son of the Father. The one to whom we listen and follow.

Move 3: Scripture

After Jesus is done preaching and teaching on the level plain for eight days, he heads up a mountain to pray. He brings alongside him Peter, John, and James.

First weird detail: Why *eight* days? Fun fact: The “eighth day in Christian tradition refers to Sunday. A day Christians gather together as one community to remember the life, death and resurrection of Christ. To worship and start the new week.”[4]

The Transfiguration story right off the bat has allusions and teachings about how we are to worship. Worship is when we come, hear God’s voice, experience grace, and leave changed.

We tend to focus just on Jesus’ dazzling white clothes. His physical appearance changing. His glory. God’s glory revealed and experienced on that mountaintop. All of which is true. And we will unpack all of that.

However, we must not ignore that there is a piece of this story that includes us. John, Peter, and James are brought up the mountain. To experience this. To witness this interaction among Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

As Jesus is transfigured and refigured, the same happens to us. Through worship, we are refigured. Our lives are refigured. Our thoughts are refigured. Our paths are refigured.

Yes, we proclaim the glory and awesomeness of our beautiful Savior. Yet, we also proclaim that we are always becoming. Always growing. Always being refigured.

Back to Scripture: Jesus and the disciples are on the mountain. And the disciples are exhausted. Physically tired from hiking up the mountain. But also probably psychologically from all Jesus’ challenging teaching.

It’s like how I feel when I do lots of self-knowledge, self-reflection work. All important work. But it’s exhausting.

The disciples sit to rest. And that’s when Jesus begins to pray. The disciples assume it’ll just be another time Jesus re-centers himself. But that’s not what happens.

An unexpected light falls upon Jesus. His face changes. His clothes become dazzling white. And he is greeted by Moses and Elijah. Two prominent Old Testament leaders who joined in past ministry.

Notice: Christ is not shining alone. Christ is with Elijah and Moses. Together, they are almost one beautiful, full light. The glory of God. The light of God. They aren’t witnessed or experienced alone. They occur in relationship. The Trinity shows us this. The Transfiguration story shows us this, too. God’s glory is only possible if it’s in community. God’s light is made full when we share it with the world.[5]

Moses, Jesus, and Elijah begin to speak of Jesus’ departure, which is to be accomplished at Jerusalem. Allusions to the cross, no doubt.

And for one brief moment, the past, present, and future collide. The past symbolized by Moses and Elijah. The present symbolized by Jesus and the disciples. The future

symbolized by the intimate conversation about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and ultimately the cross. [6]

It's this amazing moment. The disciples are awe-struck. They see the thread of God woven in the world's past, present, and future. They recognize—maybe for the first time—that Jesus isn't just a human prophet. He is the chosen one. Born of this world but clearly from God, too. Holy. Mysterious. Other. Who can never be fully understood by our doctrines or theologies.

And Peter wants to do something to remember this moment. He doesn't want to forget this. And, truthfully, he doesn't want this moment to end.

So Peter suggests building little homes for the three men. Jesus. Moses. And Elijah. So they can all stay up on that mountain together. Never leave. Retreat from all the world's messes. Just stay up on that mountaintop forever.

And as soon as Peter opens his mouth and speaks, the extraordinary mountaintop experience ends.

For far too long, we've been hard on Peter for his suggestion and for ending this beautiful vision of Jesus. Because, if we are all honest with ourselves, we, too, want mountaintop experiences. Experiences where we stand in the presence of God. That bring us to our knees. That helps us endure life's struggles.

The truth is we need mountaintop experiences. We cling to them in tough moments.[7] We share them to help people know they are still happening. That the Holy Spirit is active and alive. Loose in the world. Bringing about change and transformation still.

The interaction between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah ends. A cloud comes over the disciples and affirms who Jesus is. God's Son. The chosen one who will accomplish everything in Jerusalem. And the voice of God finishes by saying, "Listen to him."

Jesus then returns back to his normal appearance and human form. Returns back to a way we can somewhat understand and somewhat access God. In flesh. In human form.

Move 4: Takeaways

This dramatic scene and story of Jesus' Transfiguration teach us a lot about faith. As we've unpacked this.

But I think the big take-away, for me, is that Jesus doesn't want to stay on the mountain. The conversation is all about Jesus' departure. The journey and movement to Jerusalem. When Peter asks to stay, God reminds him and us who Jesus is. And in revealing who Jesus is, we know, too, his mission: to be the light of the world.

God's glory doesn't stay on the mountain. Directly following this mountaintop experience, they head down the mountain. And, once again, heal the sick and preach the good news to the messy, broken world.

Peter, selfishly—like all of us—doesn't want to leave the mountain. Doesn't want to return home and go back to work. He wants to stay on vacation. Sipping pina coladas and drinking that classy boxed wine.

But we are reminded that God's glory isn't meant to be captured or seized. God's light cannot be contained or hidden. It's meant to be shared. In community. In relationship. Not with some, but with the whole world.

And we are a part of that work. Jesus brought the disciples up with him. At other times in Jesus' ministry, he retreats to be alone. Here Jesus retreats for prayer but brings his inner circle along.

We are Christ's inner circle. As Christ becomes that beautiful, full light, we, too, are called to be our full, beautiful selves. Not listening to the critics of the world. Not listening to the noise. But listening to the chosen one. Listening to God's voice. Who says, "Come. Join me on the mountain. Experience my light."

We receive. But then we come down from the mountain and become who Jesus created us to be. By doing so, we live more and more into the image of God, and image doesn't dwell in just some of us, but lives in all of us.

Move 5: Vanessa

Some of us may be wondering, "Have I been in the presence of God? Have I had a mountaintop experience?" And if you have, I pray you share that story or those stories with this community.

But, if you are like me, sometimes you have had a rough week. A long week. And it just doesn't feel like anything uplifting has occurred in a while. When I start to feel like that, I always remember what a young child taught me.

When I was in Cedar Rapids, there was a young family who had a daughter named Vanessa. Her name fit her perfectly. She was vivacious and goofy.

Well, on First Communion Sunday, her older sister received Communion for the first time. I remember giving Sophie the bread and seeing how proud she was. Directly behind her was Vanessa. Vanessa came up to me and, knowing she was younger, I gave her a blessing.

Vanessa's eyes filled with tears, and she left the table angry. After worship, I talked with Vanessa's family and said I'd be happy to give Communion to Vanessa. They were grateful because they knew if they had to wait, Vanessa would throw lots of tantrums.

So that week, I sat down individually with Vanessa, and we talked about Communion. She was so excited. She just kept saying, “I can’t wait to be included with everyone else.”

That following Sunday, it came time for Communion. And up came Vanessa and Sophie. Sophie received first. Then it was Vanessa’s turn. She had the biggest smile on her face.

I said those profound words to her: “The body of Christ given for you, Vanessa.”

And she didn’t say, “Amen.” She didn’t say, “I believe it.” She shouted, “YESSSS!”

The whole congregation burst out laughing. And I remember thinking that’s how we should all leave the table.

At the table we are in the presence of God. Not only that, we taste the grace and presence of God.

We leave not fully knowing why everything happens. Not fully knowing what the future holds. But we receive an image of the dazzling Christ. We experience our belonging.[8]

That’s what we cling to. That’s our mountaintop. That starts our week. That transfigures us and our lives. But we don’t stay there. We come back down.

We retreat so we can return to the world. To live as Christ lived. With love, mercy, and compassion.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Rockwell, Nancy. “Transparent. Transfigured. The Difference is what happens to the Heart,” *The Bite in the Apple*, 2016. TextThisWeek.com on Luke 9:28-43.

[2] Lewis, Karoline. “No Ordinary Mountaintop,” *Dear Working Preacher*, WorkingPreacher.org, January 31, 2016.

[3] Lose, David. “Worship Transfigured.” ...In the Meantime. Feb. 1, 2016, TextThisWeek.com on Luke 9:28-43.

[4] Lose, David. “Worship Transfigured.”

[5] Carvalhaes, Claudio. “Commentary on Luke 9:28-36,” WorkingPreacher.org, February 7, 2016.

[6] Hunt, Janet. “The Transfiguration: God has the Long View,” *Dancing with the Word*, 2016, TextThisWeek.com on Luke 9:28-43.

[7] Lewis, Karoline. “No Ordinary Mountaintop.”

[8] Hunt, Janet. “The Transfiguration: God has the Long View,” *Dancing with the Word*, 2016, TextThisWeek.com on Luke 9:28-43.

Reflection Questions

- *How does the shining image of Jesus shape your vision and life in faith?*
- *Which character do you identify with in the story? Are you kept silent in awe? Are you, like Peter, baffled and confused by the presence of the divine?*
- *When have you felt in the presence of God? How did you respond?*