



LET US ALL BE TRANSFIGURED

II PETER 1:16-21, LUKE 9:28-36
ELDER FRED MOLLON



The Transfiguration of Jesus, Armando Alemdar Ara, 2004

**23
FEB**

The story of the transfiguration has always had a special meaning for me because it relates back to my childhood. Growing up, the name of my church was “The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Transfiguration.” Quite a mouthful for a young kid to say, so we all affectionately said, “Transfiguration church.” The church was built after the depression when many supplies were scarce but the one thing upon which they didn’t skimp was the stained-glass windows. In the front of the church, behind the altar, was a three-panel window. The center panel, and largest, was of Jesus, standing with Moses and Elijah. The two side panels were of James, John, and Peter. It was always a source of pride when I would hear this story read or preached, that that was my church’s name.

In the section before our scripture, we have the story of Jesus sending out the twelve to preach and perform signs among the people. When they return, they are debriefed by Jesus and tell of all that they did and that happened. Jesus then asks them who the people say he is. Two answers are given: some say that you are “The Prophet,” of whom Moses predicted; others say that you are Elijah who is to come. Jesus then asks who they say he is, and this is where we get Peter’s confession, “You are the Messiah.” As our story tells us, eight days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain to pray, and during that prayer time, his appearance is changed. Typically, the disciples have fallen asleep, but are awakened, apparently, by “light” of the appearance of Jesus, as well as the presence of Moses and Elijah. They are awestruck, and as the two are leaving, Peter, in his haste to say something, blurts out, “let’s build three tabernacles, one for each of you.” As that happens the cloud that has hovered over the mountain envelopes them all and says, “This is my Son, listen to him.” Then, all returns to normal, and they descend from the mountain the next day.

For a group of Jewish young men, this story is highly significant. It has many symbols that were common in Judaism and of which most Jews were aware. First, we have the symbols of the Messiah, represented in Moses and Elijah. Moses is considered to be one of, if not the greatest figure in the Old Testament. He was the one who went up onto the mountain, and after a few days, met and spoke with God. During that time his appearance was also changed, so much so, that when he descended from the mountain, he had to put a veil over his face because the people couldn’t bear to look upon him. Moses was the one to whom God gave the Law for the people. A law that was not to become a rigid set of dos and don’ts,

rather it was to be a love letter, if you will, that would show the people the high standards that God demands and it was to draw us into God, relying upon his spirit to help us live as we should. Moses was the one who led them through the wilderness. However, because he had grievously disobeyed God, he was not allowed to enter the promised land, but in the end, God is the one who buried him, that is, he was taken by God, and no one saw him again. As Moses approached what he knew to be his end, he appointed another to take over the leadership of the people, and that person was “Yeshua or Joshua.” Joshua was the one who led the people into the Promised Land and led them in battle as they subdued it and he became their hero.

The next figure we meet is Elijah. He was considered to be the greatest of all the prophets. As you may remember from our Passover meals, or if you’ve attended a Passover Seder, you know that there is always an empty chair at the table and this chair is for Elijah, the one who is to come as the precursor of the Messiah. Elijah was the prophet who stood up boldly against the king and the worship of the false god, Baal. He opposed the king, denouncing this and by the power of God, withheld the rains. He challenged all the priests of Baal and God’s power was shown. Through Elijah, the widow in Zarephath and her family were kept alive through the drought by a never-ending supply of oil and flour. When her only son died, through Elijah, God restored him to life. Then, as Elijah was nearing the end of his time God told him to choose a successor and Elijah chose a man named Elisha, whom he found plowing with twelve oxen. Elijah was then taken in a whirlwind and as he left, his mantle fell to Elisha. Elisha was the one who through God’s power led the revolt against the king to cleanse the land of Baal worship. In Hebrew, Elisha is another iteration of the name “Yeshua or Joshua.” It’s interesting to note that when Mary and Joseph are told that she will conceive and have a child, a son, that his name will be “Yeshua or Joshua.”

Next, we have the mountain. In the OT, and in the prophets, the mountain was always the place where God was met. As previously stated, the mountain was where Moses met and spoke with God. It was on the mountain that Moses’ appearance was changed. It was on the mountain that Moses received the instructions for the people summed up as we know it, in “The Ten Commandments.” So it is that Jesus is summoned to the mountain. There he prays and there he, too, is changed. His appearance becomes radiant and gleaming white and there he meets with the two great ones, Moses and Elijah to discuss his own departure. Then, the cloud descends and covers the mountain and God speaks, just as on Sinai, and tells the three disciples, “This is my son. Listen to him.” This is a direct reference to that time, recorded in Deuteronomy 18, where Moses is telling the people that God will raise up a prophet like him and Moses says, “You must listen to him.”

The mountain, in this case, can refer to two different mountains spoken of in the scriptures. The first of course is the reference to Mt. Sinai where Moses met with God and where the Law was given. The other reference is also connected with the Messiah and refers to the future, the Parousia or the return of Jesus after his ascension. In either place, the Messiah is connected to the mountain top experience with God.

Maybe not at that moment, but I can only imagine how these three men must have felt, later on, remembering this incident and the Spirit stirring their hearts as they read the scriptures, and to understand that what they saw on that mountain was the culmination of generations of expectation and that they had seen the Messiah in His glory. On the mountain Moses only saw God from the back, but these men saw him in full radiance.

Where does this leave us? What are we to take for ourselves from this story? One of the interesting things is that as in other places when the disciples join Jesus in prayer they go to sleep. Being with someone as they pray is not a particularly exciting time. It's usually quiet, or if the person is speaking, it's a conversation with God, not you, so there is no need to respond. If the prayer time goes on for some time, I can see how a person would get bored and perhaps drowsy. On the other hand, it can also be a time to become engaged and join with that person in prayer. However, they did not. I wonder how different that experience would have been had they stayed awake.

Do we find ourselves "tuning out" when something isn't as exciting as we hoped? Or, do we find ways to stay engaged so that we might learn or see something we didn't expect? I know that has happened to me. I remember one particular class in college, I used to position myself in the seat that was directly in front of my professor, but he had this soft monotone voice that could put a sloth to sleep. It didn't help either, that this class was right after lunch. Try as I might, it was a real battle to stay awake, let alone be engaged, in what he was saying. So, we can't be too hard on Peter and the others.

Another thing that we can take from this story is our penchant to bring everything down to a human scale. There are times of a "mountain top experience" and these are wonderful, but one of two things can happen. On one hand, we have that experience, and our hearts are stirred, and our soul exhilarated. However, when we "come down" from it, and are once again back in the real world, things don't just seem the same as up on the mountain and all that exhilaration and excitement are gone. We are once again faced with the everyday things of life and seemingly have no way to respond to what faces us. For Jesus and his three disciples, it was dealing with a man whose son was possessed by an evil spirit. The man is distraught because of the condition of his son and remarks that Jesus' other disciples couldn't help him. Jesus is frustrated because these are the folks, he had sent out only a few days before and now they were helpless. Notice, we have no indication of any action on the part of the three who were just in the presence of God with Jesus. So, Jesus takes the man's request and heals the boy.

The other thing that can happen is what happened back up on the mountain. Peter and James and John have witnessed an amazing thing. They have stood in the presence of God and heard his voice speak to them. What does Peter do? First, like us, he feels he has to say something. He has just woken with a start, sees the 2 men talking with Jesus and right away, he has to say something. Like us, he can't just be quiet and take in what he's seeing, rather he must speak whatever comes to mind without thinking first. And what does he want to do? He wants to memorialize this moment. Build 3 buildings and name them for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Rather than taking in the living Spirit and going on from there, Peter wants this moment to become static, something to which they could return and remember it. The church has done this down through the centuries. Even today, on top of Mt. Tabor, the church that is there has 3 chapels, one for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. We find it hard to just let the moment be and then take the glory with us and go on.

The other thing that we see in Peter's words is the attempt to bring Jesus down from glory and make him equal with earthly things. Peter wants to build three tabernacles as a memorial and make Jesus equal with Moses and Elijah. We have seen this happen too. People have written books and theses on Jesus, claiming that he was only a great philosopher or moralist. They say that he was really a revolutionary figure who wanted to overthrow the current system. In all these things, he is never proclaimed as the Son of God, rather, just another man, like Gandhi or Buddha, who simply had a different way of looking at things. What the cloud covering did up on that mountain was to quiet Peter and let them hear the voice

of God, reminding them that Jesus was greater than any of God's servants because he was the Son of God.

Jesus is our Joshua. He came to lead us into "the Land," the Kingdom of God. He has gone before us and stands with us, as we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. He stands with us as we break down the walls that would divide us. Like Joshua, he leads us as we begin to possess the Kingdom and walk and act like children of God, in whom God dwells and fills with his Spirit. Just as Joshua did not do this for the people, so Jesus does not do it for us. Rather, he gives us the same power he had. He fills us with the same love and mercy he possessed. He even tells us, you'll have problems in this world, just like I did but here's the secret: don't be afraid because I overcame the world! So just like those Hebrews who came into the Land, we too can enter into this world and know that we are also overcomers.

Jesus is our Elisha. He has overthrown the principalities and powers that rule in high places, just as Elisha led the revolt that rid the land of false gods and corruption. So, Jesus leads us. We too can face the tough things of this life and know that the victory is already ours. There may be those that would like to silence the church; those that try to tell us when and where we can or cannot pray; those who try to tell us who is or isn't worthy; those who try to restrict the church from helping the homeless and poor by restricting those activities but we have nothing to fear. We are children of a different Kingdom and our orders, our lives, are given from God.

This all sounds too good for words and perhaps it sounds like a tall tale. I choose to stand with Peter, when he said, "We do not follow cleverly devised stories..." Peter was there. He and the others were eyewitnesses to the glory of God. Aside from Peter's witness is the witness of the prophets who spoke as the Spirit gave them utterance. It is only for us to believe and then live and move as children of God, redeemed by Jesus. It is now for us to allow the Spirit to change us, to transform us, and to allow the glory of God to shine through our lives. To shine through in a way that we become lights to the world, making clear the path to God. It is for us to become salt in the world, willing to be that which is disturbing, and that which cleanses and preserves.

It is for us to be transformed.

Let us be transfigured!

Amen.