

Title: Turn Around Bright Eyes

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we give you thanks for your son, the light from light, the true God from true God; may we always be illumined by his light, choosing the good over the bad, and may his light forever shine in a world broken by sin, we pray in his name. Amen.

I have not told many people this. It seemed like something to be confidential, but it really isn't. It is a mountain top experience. It is a Cursillo story.

I think most people come away from Cursillo with a mountain top experience. Suzie and I went on the first co-ed Cursillo in Nevada in 1975. It changed us and we made very good friends with a couple we went on Cursillo with.

Many years later, I worked a number of Cursillos when they were held at an old Forest Service camp at Clipper Mills, above Nevada City. I was often paired with a Methodist pastor from Chico.

During one of these Cursillos, the wife of the Methodist pastor was giving her talk. I was sitting in the back of the room. During her talk, I saw a bright light that rested on her shoulders and surrounded her head. I thought that maybe it was something behind her or some reflection. But as she walked around the podium, the light moved with her. As people approached her and thanked her after her talk, the light faded away.

I told them both about what I saw after her talk. They took it in, and perhaps like Mary, pondered those words in their hearts. I pondered them too. I have no idea what it meant. I did not build a booth. It was just one of those once in a lifetime spiritual experiences. Certainly, God was in that place.

I think God visits us often. I also think that we miss many of those opportunities, because we are not paying attention. At least, that is true of me. I was lucky that day at that Cursillo to be paying attention.

I have a feeling that my wonder at that Cursillo was not unlike that of Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. They, too, may have thought, “This is wonderful, but what does it mean?”

Mark’s story of the transfiguration takes place six days after Jesus told his disciples that if they want to follow Jesus, they must take up their cross to do so. And in order to save their life, they must lose it. This was after Jesus predicts his passion, his death and resurrection. Mark places the Transfiguration in the middle of his gospel between Jesus’ baptism and Jesus’ resurrection. It is the turning point of Mark’s gospel.

Why six days? Some say that this parallels Moses’ ascent on Sinai. When Moses goes up the mountain, he takes three companions and the elders. When Moses went up the mountain, a cloud covered the mountain for six days before God called Moses out of the cloud. God’s voice is heard on the Mount of the Transfiguration only after a cloud descends on Jesus and the inner circle of Peter, James, and John. On Sinai, Moses receives the law, and comes back with a face so luminescent that it hurt people’s eyes to see him.

There is also a parallel in Daniel. “As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being^e coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One^f and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14)

Jesus takes his inner circle of Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Six days earlier they were making their way to Caesarea Philippi, in gentile territory. Now Mark does not say where they are. Mount Tabor is the traditional location, mentioned by early Christian leaders. The Church of the Transfiguration is on the top of Tabor. Another candidate is Mount Hermon, because it is very tall and it is not far from Caesarea Philippi. I think, Mark did not know where it took place. Otherwise, he would have said so.

Mark makes no claim they reached the summit. Presumably, just from the way the scene plays out, they did. At some point on this trip, Jesus is

^e Aram *one like a son of man*

^f Aram *the Ancient of Days*

transfigured. Transfigure means to be transformed into something more beautiful or elevated. Mark helps us by describing the event. Jesus' clothes became really, really white.

In the second book of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Gandalf the Grey becomes Gandalf the White. Gandalf is very bright and luminous. How did this happen? In the first book, Gandalf sacrifices himself to save the members of the fellowship of the ring from some demon. Confronting the demon, Gandalf forms a cross with his sword and his staff. Gandalf falls with the demon down an abyss. As Gandalf describes it, he fights the demon for ten days after which, they both die.

After that, he does not remember what happened, except he is now Gandalf the White. J. R. R. Tolkien has Gandalf undergo a death and resurrection experience. Gandalf is transfigured. Gandalf's friends do not recognize him, at first. As Tolkien wrote: "There [Gandalf] stood, grown suddenly tall, towering above them. His hood and his grey rags were flung away. His white garments shone. [...] They all gazed at him. His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand. Between wonder, joy, and fear they stood and found no words to say."¹

On the Mount of Transfiguration, two companions join Jesus. Mark identifies them as Elijah and Moses. There is no way Peter, James, or John could have recognized long dead prophets. Jesus would have to have told them who they were. Mark learned their identities from Peter.

Throughout the gospels we hear the phrase, "the law and the prophets." In Jesus' time there was no agreed upon "Bible." There was no consensus on which books constituted scripture except the Torah, the law, the first five books of the Bible. After the law, the psalms were generally thought of as having authority, though they were used principally as the temple hymnal. Then there was a general category of the prophets. Different groups had different lists of books or scrolls that made up the prophets. So, when we hear the phrase "the law and the prophets," it refers to scripture in Jesus' time.

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, LOTR Book III, Ch. 5, "The White Rider."

The law is personified by Moses, the law-giver. The prophets are personified by Elijah, the greatest prophet of all. To have Moses and Elijah with Jesus was probably seen as scriptural warrant for Jesus' ministry. The two greatest Old Testament figures give Jesus their blessing.

It occurred to me that Moses and Elijah must be raised in order for them to appear with Jesus. Or, more likely, these are spiritual representations of Moses and Elijah. It certainly was not their flesh. In a sense, Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus and appearing before Peter, James, and John implies that there is some kind of spiritual continuance of us after death, even before Jesus' resurrection. Mark makes no attempt to explain this.

Just as Gandalf's friends were terrified seeing him for the first time. So were Jesus' friends at the Transfiguration. Peter felt compelled to say something, anything. Feeling like he had to do something, Peter offered to build booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. In Jesus' time, the Festival of Booths was one of three command pilgrimages to the Jerusalem temple. It was an end of harvest season holy days' observance. The booths probably came from small dwellings made for the harvest. They are reminders of the fragile dwellings the Israelites had during the exodus.

As if seeing Jesus transfigured wasn't terrifying enough, a cloud comes down on them. Then out of the cloud there is a voice. The voice repeats what God said at Jesus' baptism. The three primary apostles are told that Jesus is the beloved son and they are to listen to him. Maybe Peter needed to do more listening and less talking.

Then instantly, everything was back to normal, except Peter, James, and John were likely bewildered and frazzled. To keep the messianic secret a secret, Jesus orders them to tell no one what they saw until after the Son of Man is raised from the dead.

Peter, James, and John got a glimpse of what the resurrected Christ looks like. Perhaps it was to prepare them so that they would recognize Jesus after the resurrection. After the women go to the empty tomb and find an angel there, they fled the tomb in terror. The early preparation of the inner circle will ease the spread of the news of Jesus' resurrection.

The Transfiguration was a prefiguring epiphany of Jesus' final epiphany, the resurrected Christ. We will carry our metaphorical crosses during Lent and then meet Jesus at the Last Supper, at the cross, and at the empty tomb.

Jesus told the disciples that he would be crucified. That had to be bad news. It was not something that should go on a recruiting poster. Then the inner circle of Peter, James, and John see Jesus transfigured. They see that there is an end story that does not end with crucifixion. Life is full of bad news. Life is also full of good news. We can choose to stay mired in the bad news or rejoice in the good news. I for one, choose the good news.

Text: **Mark 9:2-9** (NRSV)

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one¹ on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^m one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved;ⁿ listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ²

¹ Gk *no fuller*

^m Or *tents*

ⁿ Or *my beloved Son*

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mk 9:2-9). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

