

Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-10 CEB Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them,³ and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white.⁴ Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus.⁵ Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines--one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."⁶ He said this because he didn't know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!"⁸ Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One had risen from the dead.¹⁰ So they kept it to themselves, wondering, "What's this 'rising from the dead'?"

Transfiguration

The Transfiguration: It's an odd word. It has this churchy sound to it, like it's part of the holy vocabulary used by sanctimonious and self-righteous people to confuse and bewilder those of us who aren't in the in-group of those who are really saved. I finally thought of a place where the word is used in a setting that's more familiar. *"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in whose bosom that transfigures you and me: As Christ died to make us holy . . ."* (verse 4) Still, I don't think that line from the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* helps us understand the meaning of the word, and as I thought about it, the theology is a little shaky, too.

Things got clearer when I looked in a dictionary. Transfigure means to "change the figure, form, or outward appearance." The Greek word here is *metamorphothe* and our word *metamorphosis* is a direct descendent from that Greek word. It means to transfigure or transform. It's the same word that Paul uses in Romans 12:2 when he writes, "Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is--what is good and pleasing and mature."

Early in the first chapter in Mark's gospel, we read about the baptism of Jesus and that "there was a voice from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.'" (Mark 1:11 CEB) Then, just a few verses before today's text, Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. But when Jesus goes on to say that he will be rejected by the Jewish religious establishment, be put to death and then rise from the dead, Peter gets all upset and scolds Jesus - and tries to correct him. At this point, Jesus famously tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." (Mar 8:31-33 CEB) Peter must have really felt shamed and put down. Six days later the Transfiguration takes place and Peter is one of the three disciples that Jesus takes with him up a mountain.

There are lots of mountaintop experiences in the Bible. Moses met with God twice on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Elijah went up on Mount Carmel to pray that God would end the drought. Elijah went to Mount Sinai to escape Queen Jezebel's wrath and there he heard the still small voice of God. (1 Kings 19:9-12) The Temple in Jerusalem was built on a high place that came to be called the temple mount and in the temple, in the innermost room, the Holy of Holies, was the Ark of the Covenant which was regarded as the seat for God. It's like God seems to hang out on mountains. One of the oldest titles for God is El Shaddai, which means, God of the mountain. We speak today of mountaintop experiences. A lot of people say that on top of a mountain they feel closer to God. Is God somehow more present on the mountain top - or perhaps that's where we're most receptive?

Someone who is familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures might notice lots of parallels to today's text in Mark. First of all, there's the experience of God up on a mountain. As already mentioned, Moses and Elijah encountered God on a mountain. In today's text we find Jesus and Moses and Elijah on a mountain where God will be encountered.

After six days Jesus went up the mountain. After six days Moses heard God calling him to come up Mount Sinai. (Exodus 24:16) Jesus took three disciples with him. Moses took three men with him to Mount Sinai. (Exodus 24:1 CEB) God spoke to Moses out of a cloud that settled on the mountain. God speaks to Peter, James, and John out of a cloud. The brightness of Jesus' clothes is similar to the brightness of Moses' face after he came down the mountain. And in both cases, those around them were afraid. Mountaintop experience isn't all sunshine and light. Sometimes entering into the shadows and clouds transforms us.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus has some unexpected aspects. Jesus expresses no emotion. He doesn't do anything. He doesn't say a single word. At his baptism, God spoke directly to him. "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." Now up on the mountain, God speaks to the disciples. "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him." Later, at the foot of the cross, a Roman officer, an outside observer, declared, "This man was certainly God's Son." (Mar 15:39 CEB) From solitary revelation - to private revelation to a few followers - to public declaration by an outsider, the news of the significant identity of Jesus widens through Mark's gospel.

The story of the transfiguration reveals Jesus as unique, not to be equated with even the great spiritual importance of Moses and Elijah, the two most revered prophets in Israel's history. Moses and Elijah disappear and Jesus ends up "alone" in solitary splendor. As Jesus remains alone of the three, a voice from the cloud commands, "Listen to him!" Listen to Jesus, more than Moses or Elijah, their time as the foremost prophets of Israel is over. Now Jesus is preeminent.

Despite the spectacular circumstances, the uniqueness and divinity of Jesus aren't on public view. And Jesus tries to keep it hidden by ordering them not to tell anybody what they saw and heard.

While Jesus doesn't speak during the transfiguration, Peter can't keep from talking. Oddly, after proclaiming that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, only six days earlier, now Peter simply addresses Jesus as rabbi, as teacher. I'm not sure if there's anything significant about that, but it seems a little odd. Perhaps, after Jesus had told the disciples that he would be killed by the authorities, and after Jesus had called him Satan, perhaps Peter was less sure about whether Jesus was God's anointed one. Seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah would certainly reassure Peter that Jesus was at least a great prophet. Overwhelmed by this unworldly experience, Peter tries to create containers for the event, putting holy men in individual tabernacles: organized, separated, preserved. Like Peter, when we have a significant experience we want to "build booths" to prolong or commemorate it. An event so spectacular needs to be recognized, and its importance memorialized.

Poor Peter, the next thing he knows, a cloud covers the scene, God speaks and commands that they listen to Jesus, and Moses and Elijah are gone. Once more, Peter has jumped to conclusions and once more, his conclusions are wrong.

Peter isn't the only one who is confused about what Jesus is doing. James and John, who were at the Transfiguration with Peter, don't do much better. In the very next chapter they appear to still expect a political Messiah, glorious and triumphant. ³⁷ They said, "Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory." (Mark 10:37 CEB) Despite traveling around with Jesus, hearing his teachings, and seeing how he served those who were sick and hungry, they still expected him to come into political power.

And he had to rebuke them by telling them plainly that whoever wanted to be a leader must be the servant of all. What a paradox!

Indeed, Jesus is full of paradox. There's the paradox of the glory of the Transfiguration and yet Jesus says he will be killed. God proclaims that Jesus is God's son, but the religious leaders will be his enemies. Jesus relieves the sufferings of others, but he will suffer and die on a cross for all to see. God claims Jesus as a dearly loved son and Jesus says, "Don't tell anybody." We see divine power and yet weakness before the authorities. Jesus exhibits lowliness and majesty. Following Jesus involves both mystic experience and costly discipleship.

And the misunderstanding continues. Even as they descend the mountain the disciples are wondering, "What is this rising from the dead? What's this 'all who lose their lives – will save their lives?'"

When we are honest with ourselves we don't fare much better than those disciples. We have as much trouble with the paradoxes as they did. We understand power much better than we do servant leadership. We're often more comfortable with the divinity of Jesus than we are with the humanity of Christ. Loving our enemies seems to make no sense at all. Turning the other cheek sounds more masochistic than righteous.

And so, we are in need of transfiguration. We need, as Paul expressed it, to "be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds so that [we] can figure out what God's will is-- what is good and pleasing and mature." We pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It's blatantly obvious that this world looks nothing like God's kingdom of wholeness and peace. But that is what we are called to do. One of the great goals of the church is to work for the transformation of society. But that can only happen if the church undergoes radical transformation. And, the church is us. The transforming of the church begins with the transforming of our minds, individually.

Lily Tomlin said, "Remember, we're all in this alone." It's a paradox, like losing your life to gain life. Each of us lives a kind of holy solitude, a place in which our soul is alone with God. But that's true of all of us, we all experience that. We're all in this boat together, alone. Pray for God's kingdom to come. Pray for the church to transform society by first transforming itself. Pray for the renewing transformation of your own mind and your own life. Amen.

Be transformed by renewing your minds.
Embrace the paradoxes of faith.
Lead by serving. Show power through weakness.
Remember, we're all in this alone.