

Christ's Transfiguration and Ours

Mark 9:2-9

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

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Over the years I taught biblical courses in departments of religion at a couple of universities that were located in cities where I was a pastor. When our focus in class was on the Gospels, I encouraged students not to be afraid to ask the questions that a smart, observant third grader would ask. My reason for doing that was because, as we get older, we become more conscious of our image. As a result, we are reluctant to ask obvious questions. The result is that obvious questions often don't get asked, unless there is a smart, observant third grader around.

Here are a couple of questions that a sharp ten-year-old might ask about the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. First, regarding the part where Peter, James and John see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah and Peter wants to build booths for each of them and he calls them by name – how did he know it was Moses and Elijah?

Here's another obvious question. If Peter, James, and John obeyed Jesus when he told them not to tell anybody what they had experienced – and we would probably assume that they obeyed him -- how did anybody find out about it? How did it end up on the front page of the Gospels unless somebody leaked it?

I raise these issues not to question their truth value but in order to cause us to think about the nature of the story.

We know the basic outline. Jesus took his three closest disciples – Peter, James, and John -- to a mountaintop, where the Gospels of Matthew and Mark say, "*He was transfigured before them.*"

Luke tells the same story, but he doesn't use the word "transfigured," which turns out to be the pivotal word. You know the Greek word behind the English word, even if you don't know you know it. Think caterpillar to butterfly. The word is metamorphosis. For something to be changed in its basic form. "*He was metamorphosized before them.*" (Metamorphosis is not an English translation of the Greek word; it is the Greek word. We have simply carried it over – transliterated it -- into our vocabulary.)

Suddenly, the three disciples saw two figures talking with Jesus – whom they somehow recognized as Moses and Elijah – who had a couple of things in common. First, they were monumental figures in Israel's history: Moses, the giver of the law, and Elijah, one of Israel's great prophets. Second, they had both been dead a very long time - - 1300 years and 850 years respectively.

Then, the text says, "*A bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'*" When they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone. It was over.

Writer, pastor, teacher, Barbara Brown Taylor said, "If anything even remotely that strange has ever happened to you, then you know why Peter, James and John were relieved when Jesus told them to keep what had happened to themselves. Supernatural light. Famous people come back from the dead. God talking to you from inside a cloud. Things like that may happen in the Bible but try talking about them now and someone's going to give you the name of a good psychiatrist."

What was that about? Matthew's version of the Transfiguration gives us an important clue. Mark concludes the story by saying, "*As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen.*" Matthew, who used Mark as a source, repeats Mark's version word for word – there not being copyright laws in those days – except he inserted one word. He said, "*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the **vision.**'*"

Matthew wants us to understand that what happened that day on the mountain was a vision, a deep, powerful spiritual experience that the three men shared.

I think that means that if you and I happened on Jesus, Peter, James, and John that afternoon when we were hiking on the mountain, we would not have seen Moses and Elijah or the cloud, and we would not have heard the voice of God. Unless somehow we participated in their vision.

The vision had all the characteristics of the way religious experiences were understood in that day.

"*A cloud overshadowed them.*" That likely sounds strange to most of us. On occasions when we were aware of the presence of God, clouds probably were not involved. But anyone familiar with the history of Israel would have recognized that image. When the children of Israel traveled through the wilderness of Sinai, God led them in a cloud by day and a fire by night. When God was present in the tabernacle -- the tent that served as a worship center during their wilderness wanderings -- a cloud descended. When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, a cloud filled that holy place, so thick that priests could not see what they were doing. When Moses went to the mountain to receive the law, Sinai was covered by a cloud for six days.

A cloud signaled the presence of God. A cloud overshadowed Peter, James and John. They were engulfed by God's presence.

In that mystical moment, Jesus appeared dressed in dazzling white – like the Ancient of Days in Daniel's vision (7:9) – and his face "*shone like the sun,*" just as Moses' face shone when he came down from Sinai with the law. The ancient text says that "*his face shone because he had been talking with God.*" His face shone so brightly, he had to wear a veil.

Then a voice – the voice of God – spoke from the cloud, saying exactly what the voice from heaven said at Jesus' baptism – "*This is my Son, the Beloved*" – with these added words, "*Listen to him.*" This vision was for Peter, James, and John.

What was the takeaway from that experience for them? The Gospels don't tell us. They simply move on to the next story. Here's what I think.

Did you notice that our lectionary Gospel reading began at a rather odd place: "*Six days later.*" The author was obviously trying to connect what came before with what followed. Six days after what? In Mark's Gospel the Transfiguration of Jesus follows Peter's confession of faith. "*Who do you say that I am?*" Jesus asked. Peter answered, "*You are the Messiah.*" After receiving that answer, according to Matthew, Jesus, confident that his closest disciples, the leaders of the group, the ones who would be called on to assume leadership roles after he was gone, were ready for the really hard word, told them what was ahead for him – betrayal, suffering, death. Peter said, "Never."

We know that Jesus reprimanded Peter, calling him Satan, but don't hurry past Peter's defiant cry. Jesus' dire prediction shocked the disciples. Messiahs don't die. They

deliver the people from their oppressors. It was a troubling revelation. They may have wanted to ask Jesus, “Are you the one, or should we look for another?” as John the Baptist felt it necessary to ask. They were confused and afraid. What if they had been wrong about Jesus?

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a mountaintop where they had a vision in which they saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah and heard the voice of God say to them, “*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.*” It was exactly what they needed to hear to calm their fears. When they came down from the mountain, their faith, which had been shaken to its core, was strengthened in preparation for the difficult days ahead.

What is the takeaway for us? This will take a minute. Stay with me.

When we try to explain a life-changing experience, we often find that literal language fails us. So, we search for images. We say, it’s like this or it’s like that. For example, the Gospel according to John says that the Christian experience is so radical, it’s like starting life over. It’s like being born again.

Paul never used that well-known image; he said it’s like becoming a “*new creature in Christ.*” But how does that happen? How does one become a “*new creature in Christ*”? He explained to the Christians in Rome: “*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*” (Romans 12:2) For Paul the Christian experience is on-going process of renewal in which one’s self, one’s very life is transformed.

Guess the Greek word that is translated “transformed.” It’s metamorphosis, caterpillar to butterfly. The word the Gospels used to describe what happened to Jesus that day on the mountain is the word Paul used to describe the process of becoming a “*new creature in Christ,*” being changed, becoming more Christlike at the very core of one’s being.

Earlier in this service we heard another passage from Paul’s writings (II Corinthians 3:18): “*All of us, with unveiled faces (unlike Moses), seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed (there’s that word again, metamorphosized) into the same image from one degree of glory to another.*”

In another context Paul said, “*Just as Christ was raised from the dead, even so may you rise to walk in newness of life.*” He could have said, “*Just as Christ was transfigured (metamorphosized) on the mountain, even so may you by transfigured (changed, transformed, metamorphosized) by the renewing of your minds.*”

For Paul the Christian experience is not static. It is not a one and done deal. It is a lifetime of change. The change is not random. It has a direction. It is Christ-ward. “*It does not yet appear what we shall be,*” scripture says, “*but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*” (I John 3:2)

Jesus is the direction of our becoming; he is the end, the telos, the goal of our metamorphosis. Amen.