

Every year on this day, the last Sunday before Lent, the gospel story is the Transfiguration of Jesus. It is one of the strangest stories in the Bible, but it is also an important story for anyone trying to achieve a deeper, more meaningful faith in God, and I place all of us in that category.

What does it mean to be transfigured? To be transfigured is to be changed; changed in form and appearance. According to today's gospel reading that is what happened to Jesus. He was changed in form and appearance.

This is what we are told happened: the event begins with Jesus going up a mountain to pray. Now pause for a moment and let that little detail sink in. The starting point for what became Jesus' transfiguration was prayer. The message is clear. Before Jesus was changed, he prayed. Before we can be changed, we need to pray.

Jesus headed up the mountain to pray, and he took Peter and James and John with him. We are told that while Jesus prayed, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." He was transfigured. But there was more, much more, taking place, because Jesus and his three disciples were then joined on the mountain by two other people who had been long dead – Moses the lawgiver, and Elijah the prophet.

First of all, why was it significant that Jesus was speaking with Moses and Elijah? What was the message in that? Jewish religious tradition maintained that when Moses and Elijah reappeared, it would be a sign of the coming of the long-awaited messiah. Therefore, Moses and Elijah appearing on the mountain with Jesus was a sign to the three disciples who witnessed this bizarre event, just as it remains a sign to us today, that Jesus was and is the one sent by God as a savior to redeem a broken world.

When Moses and Elijah prepared to leave, the disciple Peter – confused and impulsive Peter – sprang into action. He did not want this amazing mountain top experience to end just yet, so he suggested to Jesus that they erect three "dwellings" or shelters, one each for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. Maybe they would then be encouraged to remain a while longer up on the mountain. Peter clearly did not want the special moment to end. Have you ever felt that way, when an event so special was happening that you did not want it to end and wished you could stop the clock, if even for a moment?

Peter's suggestion was silly. He was grasping at straws. There would be no temporary shelters erected on the mountain that day. There would be no delaying the departure of Moses and Elijah. There would be no preventing this wonderful mountain-top event from ending.

But there was a voice. We are told there was a voice from inside a cloud that insisted, in no uncertain terms, that Jesus "is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" And at that, Moses and Elijah were gone, while the disciples kept silent about the whole event, not telling anyone what they had seen or heard.

As I said, the story of the Transfiguration is strange. What do you make of it?

The reason we revisit the Transfiguration every year on the final Sunday before Lent is because the Transfiguration marks an important turning point in the life of Jesus. Prior to the Transfiguration, all attention is focused on Jesus' ministry, his teaching and healing in Galilee. After the Transfiguration, the focus turns towards Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem which ends in his arrest, trial, and execution. That is the biblical explanation.

There is also a theological explanation. As I just said, the Transfiguration revealed Jesus as the one chosen by God to fulfill the ancient prophecies of Moses and Elijah that a savior for this often sad and broken world would appear.

While biblical and theological explanations are all well and good I also need, and maybe you are the same way, to be able to take away from the scripture lessons that are read on Sunday mornings something extra to help me navigate the week ahead. So what else is there about this weird Transfiguration story that might help us to do that?

The piece of the story I would like us to think about for a couple of minutes, is when Peter tries to delay the departure of Moses and Elijah by suggesting that if the disciples build them each a little shelter, they might linger longer. Why would he do that?

Peter wants to capture and freeze in time this image he has of Jesus and the others because it is an image that he finds comforting. Come to think of it, are we not inclined to do much the same thing when it comes to our own image of Jesus and God? Is it not true that we have fixed in our minds an image of what Jesus and God are like, and we are protective of that image because we find it comforting and we are reluctant to change it? We probably spent our entire lives developing our safe and nonthreatening ideas about Jesus and God, and we do not want to change them.

But here is something to consider about today's focus on the Transfiguration. Could it be that we are invited by the transfigured Christ to hold our images of Jesus and God somewhat lightly – less firmly – and not limit Jesus and God by trying to confine our ideas about Jesus and God to some fixed dwelling or shelter that we have constructed for them in our mind? Might the message of the Transfiguration be that as serious-minded Christians we should never limit our understanding of the expansive love and light of Jesus and God?

Look at it this way: in a small village long ago lived a wise old woman. Let's call her 'Sophia,' since that name means 'divine wisdom.' Whenever the local villagers needed sound advice, they knocked on Sophia's door. In the same village lived an evil man who was a notorious thug: he was vile, greedy, a compulsive liar, untrustworthy, arrogant, and murderously violent. Let's call him, for the purposes of our story, Putin. After all, the world's attention this week is focused on the evil actions of a notorious thug named Putin who is vile, greedy, a compulsive liar, untrustworthy, arrogant, and murderously violent.

In our story, Putin resented old Sophia because she was respected for consistently providing wise and correct counsel to the villagers who arrived at her door seeking guidance. Putin, like most thugs, was driven by envy, and he was determined to prove Sophia wrong. This is how he planned to deceive her. He caught a tiny bird that he could easily conceal in his closed, grasping hand, and then he would ask Sophia if the bird was dead or alive. If Sophia said the bird was dead, then Putin would open his hand and let the bird fly away. If Sophia said the bird was alive, then Putin would secretly squeeze it to death before opening his hands.

Putin went to Sophia's home, uninvited of course, and said "Old woman, I have an important question to ask you. Is the bird in my hand dead or alive?" What do you think Sophia said? She thought for a moment then answered, "Putin, it is all in your hands. The answer is in your hands."

Isn't that the truth? How we view Jesus and God, and what we do with our vision of God, is in our hands. If we try to hold on too tightly to our often-limited image of Jesus and God, we leave no room for God to work in us. If we are not always open to discovering new dimensions of Jesus and God, whose love and light is limitless, then we can never be transformed fully into the people that God created us to be. Our Transfiguration, our transformation as humans, as Christians, is in our hands.

Today's gospel story began with Jesus going up a mountain to pray. It was by prayer that he was transfigured. I conclude today by encouraging all of us to do likewise. To recognize that is by praying that we too, in our own ways, are transformed. Prayer is the means by which we get from down here up to the

mountain top, where the view of God is clear and unobstructed. Prayer is how we avoid falling into temptation and despair and apathy when daily life at the bottom of the mountain threatens to become too difficult for us. Prayer is always our greatest weapon and defence.

I love the story of how little Mother Theresa was stopped one day by burly and heavily armed guards as she was crossing the dangerous border between Israel and Gaza. The guards asked the teeny tiny nun if she was carrying any weapons. She replied, “Oh yes, of course I’m carrying a weapon; my prayer books.”

How should we pray? Talk to God as you would talk to your very best friend. Tell God everything. Tell God your innermost thoughts and feelings, express yourself fully to God, in the most open and unrestrained way

And if nothing happens in response to your prayer – if the Voice does not rumble from out of the clouds – don’t fret it. Just keep at it. Pray from the heart like a child. Christ promised that if we ask, we will receive; if we seek, we will find; if we knock, it will be opened. And in God’s own way and time, we will be changed for the better – transfigured – through our devotion to prayer. **Amen.**

Last Sunday after the Epiphany/ Transfiguration

27 February 2022

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