

Transfiguration A (2/23/2020)

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 2

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration does not mean to become someone else, but to be seen for who you really are. Narrow human perception doesn't usually get far enough beneath the surface to see the true self, the spark of God's creativity and love. But by grace, if but for a moment, instances of transfiguration allow others to get a glimpse of God's image in you, and God's delight.

On March 18th, 1958, Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton was running errands in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, when he was struck by a vision that would inform his spiritual life from that moment on:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.... This sense of liberation... was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.... I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of a race in which God... became incarnate.... And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.¹

Have you ever had the experience of suddenly seeing someone in a new light? With a simple word or gesture, a stranger, unremarkable at first, reveals to you the depth of their humanity. Or, a person you previously thought you knew well shows you an entirely new and unexpected side. One interpreter likens

¹ *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, as cited at <https://www.spiritualtravels.info/spiritual-sites-around-the-world/north-america/kentucky-a-thomas-merton-tour/thomas-mertons-mystical-vision-in-louisville/>.

experiences like these to transfiguration, calling them “moments of surprised illumination.”²

Can we relate such moments to our Gospel from Matthew today, the famous account of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountaintop? On the one hand, this is the story of a theophany, a manifestation of God’s presence. Fourth-century theologian Ephraem the Syrian preached that “[Jesus’] face shone, not like the face of Moses, from without; from his face the glory of his divinity poured forth, yet remained with him. From himself came his own light.”³ In other words, “in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”⁴ Jesus radiates divine splendor for the disciples to see. And in this way, the transfiguration provides them with the theological context to comprehend Jesus’ prior prediction of his crucifixion and the tragic march to Jerusalem that awaits them once they descend from the mountain. To quote one commentator, the vision on the mountaintop “begins to give the disciples eyes to see God’s light [even] in the chaos to come....”⁵

But, the transfiguration doesn’t diminish Jesus’ humanity. It’s not as if God’s presence in and through him makes the incarnation any less real. If Jesus is revealed again as “God’s beloved Child with whom God is well pleased,” then that only serves to reinforce the significance of his earthly life. **Jesus doesn’t suddenly become more divine and less human; in the transfiguration, he becomes visible to the disciples for who he already is.**

² Douglas John Hall, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 452.

³ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.

⁴ Colossians 1:19.

⁵ Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 456.

I think that's a helpful way to understand transfiguration in our time. This story doesn't need to persuade us with special effects, especially those of us who are less inclined to accept reports of supernatural events. Instead, **the transfiguration is a lasting affirmation of Jesus' truest and fullest identity.**

Franciscan mystic Richard Rohr writes:

Christ is a good and simple metaphor for absolute wholeness, complete incarnation, and the integrity of creation. Jesus is the archetypal human just like us (Hebrews 4:15), who showed us what the Full Human might look like if we could fully live into it (Ephesians 4:12-16).

Divinity and humanity must somehow be able to speak as one, for if the union of God and humankind is "true" in Jesus, there is hope that it might be true in all of us too. That is the big takeaway from having Jesus also speak as the Eternal Christ. He is indeed "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," as Hebrews puts it (12:2), modeling the human journey rather perfectly.⁶

How, then, does Jesus' transfiguration inform the way we see the world around us? **Can the radiance of Christ lead us to perceive the sacredness of our neighbor? Can we recognize that the people in our midst are "all walking around shining like the sun"?**

Jeff Sharlet is an author who recently published a series of photographs and stories of the lives of strangers called *This Brilliant Darkness*. As a journalist, he had grown tired of the kind of detachment that regarded the subjects of his writing less as "people in themselves" and more as "illustrations of a larger conversation." One night, he was working on a magazine deadline at a Dunkin' Donuts when he had an encounter that would lead to the idea for his book:

⁶ *The Universal Christ*, 23, 27.

I looked up and I see the night baker. And he's wearing this T-shirt with this sort of baroque, ornately drawn skull, which is not the Dunkin' Donuts uniform, you know. And I get to talking to him and it's his last night on the job. He can't stand the night shift anymore. This is his way of expressing his feelings about that job. And I ask if I can take his picture. And I notice there's this little tattoo of a tear beneath his right eye and ask him about it. And it was for his son who had died at two months old. And we suddenly sort of stumbled into this space of intimacy. And we were both there together — for me to pretend that I was a fly [on] the wall at that moment in the middle of the night with this person, that would be inaccurate. That would be false. And I was trying to tell a true story.⁷

The way Sharlet describes his chance meeting with the night baker at Dunkin' Donuts sounds a lot like transfiguration. **To “stumble into a space of intimacy,” to meet someone in a moment of shared humanity, reveals that person’s truest and fullest identity, the spark of God’s creativity and love shining forth from them. It’s a “moment of surprised illumination.”**

Dear church, transfiguration does not mean to become someone else, but to be seen for who you really are. Narrow human perception doesn't usually get far enough beneath the surface to see the true self. But by grace, if but for a moment, instances of transfiguration allow others to get a glimpse of God's image in you, and God's delight.

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/20/807781585/human-connections-light-up-this-brilliant-darkness>.