

“Transfiguration”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
Last Sunday after the Epiphany – 22 February 2009  
Mark 9:2-9

Have you ever thought you knew somebody, only to find out that they weren't who you thought they were? It can be a disturbing, disappointing experience. We often face this let down when our heroes stumble and fall: the star athlete admits using performance-enhancing drugs; the wise mentor makes a mistake and leads us astray; the spouse or the parent or the child surprises us by revealing a side of themselves we did not know and do not like.

In these moments of awkward discovery, we can feel betrayed by the person who turned out to be different from what we thought, but we can also feel betrayed by ourselves – by our faulty perceptions and assumptions – to the extent that we begin to question our own judgment and cease to trust ourselves, which can be the most disorienting, hurtful experience of them all.

We have no way of knowing what Peter and James and John expected as they trudged up a high mountain apart with Jesus. They had certainly suffered a rough week. Six days earlier, Jesus asked them a tough question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter piped up, “You are the Messiah.” Congratulations, Peter, you win the prize! We can imagine confetti and balloons descending from the sky, and the other eleven disciples mussing Peter's hair and patting him on the back with a warm, if slightly envious, “ataboy.”

But wait, there's more. You see, Peter had no clue what he was talking about. He expected the Messiah to be a triumphal figure, who would lead his people to victory and liberty. Jesus burst that bubble when he told the disciples about how he would suffer rejection by the religious elite and be killed. This wasn't what Peter had in mind for Messiah, and he said as

much, which earned him perhaps the sternest rebuke anyone ever got from Jesus: “Get behind me Satan.” Poor Peter; from hero to zero in a matter of minutes.

Of course, that was six whole days ago, plenty of time for those wounds to heal and for greater understanding to grow about Jesus’ identity as Messiah. Besides, Peter was still among the few chosen to hike up that high mountain, so he obviously didn’t stay in the doghouse for too long.

Who knows what they had in mind as they made their way up the stony path. Maybe Jesus had some secret teaching he was only willing to divulge to a select few and not to the others. Perhaps this was a rare privilege to join Jesus in the private prayers he so often sought in out of the way places. Whatever their speculation, it’s hard to believe that any of them had anticipated anything like what they saw.

Sure, they’d seen Jesus do some amazing things: exorcising demons; healing the sick; miraculously feeding thousands, despite desperate scarcity of food; confounding the hyper-pious know-it-alls. Yet it’s hard to see how they could have been prepared for what they encountered on that high mountain, where Jesus changed, his appearance becoming a dazzling white no bleach could match. And there’s more.

Elijah and Moses appeared: two of the major prophets of the Jewish faith, long since gone, but now on Earth again, speaking with Jesus. I’ve wracked my brain trying to come up with some contemporary equivalent, like a Civil War buff seeing Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Ulysses S. Grant talking in the parking lot, or a baseball fan bumping into Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, and Cy Young out playing catch. But there’s simply nothing that comes close to how those disciples must have felt to be in the presence of Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, their teacher and Messiah. It must have been such a relief, a moment when all their

mental reservations were washed away like the grime of a hard day's work at a trough of fresh water.

Naturally, they wanted to preserve the moment. Just as we would bring out digital cameras and cell phones to record the event for posterity, Peter suggested that they build booths, simple shelters meant to honor Jesus and his revered guests. There was probably an ulterior motive behind Peter's suggestion. Instead of "build it and they will come," he was probably thinking, "build it and they might stay."

In a way, this was Peter's second rejection of what was happening with Jesus. Remember that six days before, Peter had said "No" to the idea that Jesus as the Messiah would suffer and die. Now, during this instant of transfiguration, when Jesus' identity was confirmed beyond all doubt by his conversation with these great leaders of the past, Peter wanted to control what was happening. Perhaps he was afraid that without some structure to bring order to this amazing occurrence things would get out of hand, and his fears were well founded.

You see, the transfiguration of Jesus comes right in the very middle of Mark's gospel, not by accident, but on purpose. The first half of the gospel is full of miracles, of deeds of power; the second half runs like a freight train straight to Jerusalem and Jesus' crucifixion. The miracles don't stop, but they're much less frequent, replaced by more and more conflicts with the opponents of Jesus, those ancient holy rollers, who meant well, but who were a little uptight and too sure of themselves.

The transfiguration marks a change in who Jesus is and how he operates, and it must have scared the stuffing out of Peter, James, and John. These, apparently, were the brightest and best of the twelve Jesus kept around him, but even they were utterly overwhelmed by this extraordinary epiphany. The changes were simply coming too quickly.

First, he's a wise teacher, endorsed by John's baptism in the Jordan, then Jesus emerges from the wilderness and calls some people to follow him, and they do, dropping everything to go who knows where. Then, he starts casting out demons and healing people and doing all sorts of odd things. His own family thinks he might be going crazy. The authorities are growing increasingly upset. Then Jesus wants to know what the disciples think of him, and they do their best, but even Peter, who came up with the right answer, ended up getting it wrong, because he misunderstood what type of Messiah Jesus was going to be. And now this, on the top of a high mountain, with Jesus and Moses and Elijah; it was too much, too fast, too soon.

And that's the path of discipleship each one of us walks, whether it's up a high mountain or down into the dark valley or across the flat sunny meadow. It's a journey of change, where we constantly discover new and exciting and occasionally disturbing things about Jesus. And we can sometimes feel betrayed by these fresh revelations of who Jesus is, frustrated that we thought we had him pinned down pretty good, only to realize people have tried to pin him down before, getting so desperate that they finally tried nailing him to a cross, and even that didn't work, because there's more to Jesus than meets the eye. In fact, the more we get to know him, the more we come to know that he's a mystery beyond our knowing; a person we can know only in part.

This is true of every person we know, which is why often find ourselves deflated to discover that someone isn't who we thought they were. No spouse, no matter how long they've been married, truly knows their mate inside and out. No parent, no matter how attentive and diligent, ever has a bead on precisely who their child is. And so it is with Jesus. Our knowledge of him naturally remains incomplete.

However, that partial knowledge of Jesus gives us everything we need to follow him faithfully. That partial knowledge gives us everything we need to rest assured in our salvation. That partial knowledge gives us everything we need to proclaim the good news boldly, in word and deed, to all whom we meet.

Yet our knowledge of Jesus will always remain partial, because his greatness exceeds the grasp of our feeble minds and souls. That is why we must remain wary of those too eager to declare their absolute certainty about holy things. Such folks have lost the vital element of humbleness that accompanies a faith in the true Christ, who always reserves the right to surprise us.

We see how Jesus does this, time and again, throughout history. For centuries, good-hearted Christians just knew that Jesus wanted people to follow him so badly that he wouldn't mind if Jews and Muslims were forcibly converted at the point of a sword, but over time, people began to see a freedom in the transfigured and Risen Christ that showed how wrong they were to do that. For centuries, well-meaning Christians just knew that Jesus agreed with them that some people were simply better than others and that the quality of a person's character could be judged by the color of their skin, an attitude that resulted in the practice of slavery. But over time, people began to see that Jesus himself wouldn't pass the "paper bag" test. People started to realize that the transfigured and Risen Christ died for all people, and that the grace given for all was the great equalizer that prohibits and makes ridiculous pretensions of superiority on the basis of where somebody's from or what they look like or how they dress or talk.

Just imagine, over time, what else the brightness of the transfigured and Risen Christ might reveal to us. Just imagine what solid certainties we treasure now will turn out to have been nothing more than silly assumptions, once the light of Jesus disperses the shadows of our

confusion. And it's not because Jesus is changing, so much as Jesus is changing us, by constantly revealing more of who he is, just as he did with his original disciples, who came to know him by degrees as a teacher, an exorcist, a healer, a feeder, a fierce debater, and finally as a Messiah who would conquer, not by putting people on a cross, but by allowing himself to be nailed there instead.

The transfiguration is that moment when all of the brightness of Jesus Christ comes into focus, and we realize that the more he seems to change, the more he stays the same, and it is actually us, who over time, must alter our perceptions of who he is and accept the transfiguration Jesus offers to us, so that we might become more like him. It is us, who time and again, must repent and return to the Lord, changing our beliefs and practices so that we might become more faithful followers of him.

Now for some, I know that this sermon has been disappointing, because what you wanted to hear today was some practical application of how God can get you through the tough patch you're having in your marriage or the fear you feel about your dwindling stock portfolio or the prospect of losing your job. We all come to Church, myself included, hoping to hear that sermon that will make it all better, preferably with ease and the minimum of personal sacrifice. But I'm not a Mr. Fix-It kind of preacher, and I don't much trust the ones that are, because I am convinced that the solution to pretty much every problem we struggle with has to do with how we become more faithful disciples, which is neither an easy nor an instantaneous process.

How we handle a shaky economy or a fragile relationship; how we manage the dread of death, the pain of loss, or just plain old general existential anxiety cannot be solved for anyone by anyone from this pulpit or any other inside fifteen minutes on a single day. The way we deal with what threatens and hurts us is to go deeper into our relationship with Jesus, through prayer

and study of scripture, by reflections on the sermons we hear in fellowship with others who have enough gumption to admit that they too need God's help just to get through the day with some modicum of grace. But we won't pursue that relationship with Jesus if we're looking for the quick fix or a spiritual anesthetic. We won't pursue that relationship if we think we already have all the answers and know all that we need to know.

But if we can summon the humility to confess just how great Jesus really is; if we can find peace in the awareness that Jesus appears to have a strong inclination to surprise us, both pleasantly and otherwise; if we can take the risk morning after morning that Jesus loves us better than we know how to love ourselves, then we just might find our troubles disappearing – not because the economy miraculously recovers or the relationship magically heals; but because our troubles will become less troublesome when we acknowledge Jesus for who he really is: someone always near yet slightly beyond our grasp; someone who seems to change, but remains the same; someone who alters our perceptions, so that we might find greater truth, and in that greater truth higher wisdom, and in higher wisdom fuller peace, and in fuller peace more bountiful joy, and in bountiful joy a love that surpasses all understanding, and in that love, transfiguration. Amen.