



“Metamorphosis”

Scripture – Matthew 17:1-9

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, February 26, 2017

When did you last experience the Glory of God?

Were you watching the sun set over the Grand Canyon or rise over thundering ocean waves? Did you experience the Glory of God in the effortless twirl of dancers spinning as one, or in the stillness that follows the swell of sound from the pipe organ and choir? Was it in the sweetly curled fingers of a newborn’s hand, or in the last, halting breaths of your beloved?

Such moments are probably as close as we’ve come to witnessing the Glory of the Lord to which Matthew testifies ... The Glory that somehow, mysteriously emanates from Jesus in this passage we have come to call the Transfiguration — a passage that describes a human face shining like the sun and common clothes dazzling with light, a text that describes Jesus’ bodily *figure transformed* before our very eyes.

The Transfiguration is an invitation to marvel at the awesome divinity of God made manifest in the Beloved Son. Like those first disciples, we are summoned to the mountaintop to bask in a glory that is only faintly reflected in the most glorious sunrise. It is a scene so drenched in majesty, that some have called it a misplaced Resurrection account.¹

This is the moment in Matthew’s Gospel when we glimpse for the first time the undisguised glory of God in Jesus the Christ. For weeks we have cozied up to the *person* of Jesus — listening intently to his Sermon on the Mount, learning from this earthly sage how to live this earthly life. His teachings have been radical, yes, but not other-worldly. But now, on this last Sunday in the Season of Epiphany, Jesus is revealed to us in a new light. Here on this mountaintop, the earthbound Jesus is unveiled as the Cosmic Christ as his body is transformed before our very eyes — *transfigured* so we can see clearly the Son with whom the Creator is well-pleased.

There you have it: Transfiguration in a nutshell. A scene from the life of Jesus that the church has pointed to for centuries to support one of our central claims: That the Jesus who is *fully human* is also *fully God*.

That age-old interpretation may be enough illumination of the story for many of us, but — as I see it — the task of the preacher is to pull back the veil so that the light may shine more brightly on our path of discipleship. So as

¹ Sermon Brainwave Podcast #526 – Transfiguration of Our Lord (Recorded at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota), www.WorkingPreacher.org

I read and re-read this familiar narrative this week, the question that emerged for me is: How does the Transfiguration of Christ invite transformation today?

As I was studying this text, I learned something: The word we translate as “Transfigure” is a Greek word with which you are familiar — a word that has given titles to the works of Ovid and Kafka, and now to this sermon: *Metamorphosis*. The *metamorphosis* of Christ, the transformation of Christ. Unlike the word “Transfiguration,” which — quite frankly — Jesus has a monopoly on in my mind, “Metamorphosis” could happen to anything in all creation. The divine does not have exclusive rights on the experience of transformation. In fact, encounters with the divine usually *invite* transformation.

I think we see that here in this story. In this story where three, unsuspecting disciples behold the Glory of God. Where Peter, James, and John witness the metamorphosis of Christ, and are invited to embrace a transformation of their own.

Just six days and eight verses before these disciples trek up the mountain, they learn what Jesus’ ministry — and their own ministry — must look like. Jesus has revealed that he will endure great suffering and die before being raised again² ... and that all who seek to follow must deny themselves and take up the cross as well.³ This revelation caused great distress among Jesus’ followers, and must still weigh heavy on the hearts of Peter, James, and John as they witness Moses and Elijah appear before them on the mountaintop to flank the transfigured form of Christ.

It is no wonder that the awe-struck Peter’s first response is to prolong and preserve this moment ... “*Lord, it is good for us to be here;*” he says. “*If you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*”

We can imagine the jumbled thoughts running through Peter’s mind: Lord, it is good for us to be here — where we can dwell in the divine presence for all eternity ... Where you are safe and sound, high above the crowds that will demand your life⁴ ... Where we can pretend that *this* is who you are ... a God who radiates glory, a God who belongs in the heavens — not on a Roman cross. Lord, it is good for us to be here ... where none of us must face the suffering that awaits us at the foot of this mountain.

But, as Peter is still speaking, a voice from heaven interrupts his anxious attempt to re-write the narrative: “*This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*”

We have heard this voice before at the baptism of Jesus. Now it thunders again to put a stamp of approval on Jesus’ ministry. Yes, listen to him — God says — even when he instructs you to take up your cross and follow. Taking their cue from ancestors of the faith, Peter, James, and John fall to the ground in fear. After all, this is what one does in the presence of the Holy One.

But then something simple happens ... and it’s something that changes everything: Jesus comes over to his disciples, and touches them. It is the most human of gestures, coming from one who has just stood before them as God. And in this radically ordinary moment, Jesus tells them what to do next: “Get up. Do not be afraid.”

A simple touch. The most human of gestures. Yet — when it comes from Jesus— it’s an encounter that transforms. We’ve seen it before in Matthew’s Gospel, as touch effects the healing of the leper, and the blind man, and the

² Matt 16:21

³ Matt 16:24

⁴ See Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz, Commentary on Matthew 17:1-9 in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration* (2010).

woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years.⁵ Now, the same touch empowers Peter and James and John to do what is required of them: Get up; do not be afraid. Get up; hike down this mountain. Get up, and follow me.

With this touch from the One who was just bathed in light, the disciples are transfigured from kneeling to standing, transformed from fearful to courageous. It's a subtle metamorphosis, but it's enough to empower these disciples to take the next steps with Jesus — steps they know will lead to the cross, but steps they take in hope ... for they have witnessed the Glory of God in the face of Christ and — perhaps — even felt this glory radiating through the palm of Christ's hand.

I learned something else this week while studying this passage, I discovered that the Greek verb meaning “to touch” can be translated another way: “to light or to kindle.” Jesus came and lit a fire, saying: Get up. Do not be afraid. Obviously the context begs that we stick with the translation you have before you in your pew Bible. But this discovery made me wonder: What does this encounter with the divine kindle in us?

It's hard to imagine that an ordinary, human touch could affect such transformation. That such a fleeting encounter with the Glory of God could ignite something within us. And yet, for so many of us, *this* is how we experience the grace and glory of God ... In the touch of human hand to human forehead and the feeling of water dripping down across the brow, marking us as God's own forever. In hands pressing upon our shoulders, setting us apart for certain ministries within the church, conveying the weight and blessing of our callings. In a morsel of bread placed in the palm of our hands, just enough to sustain us on our journeys, to strengthen us for the path that lies ahead.

Isn't this just the way of God? To convey glory beyond a thousand sunrises — the glory that radiates from the face of the transfigured Christ — through a crumb of bread or a drop of water, through a simple, human touch? Isn't this just the way of God? To transform us through ordinary moments of grace that have power to jolt us from fear or distress, and set us back on the path of discipleship.

Like Peter, James, and John, we have witnessed — and felt — the Glory of God ... at least as much glory as a human hand can hold. And this encounter with the divine is enough to transform us from cowering in fear to rising with courage; it's enough to transform us by the grace of God to do what Jesus asks of us ...

In the weeks ahead, we too will be summoned to walk down the mountain and face the pain and suffering of this world. As we enter the season of Lent, Jesus beckons us to walk the way of the cross ... a way that winds through the valley of sorrow before taking us to a mountain lined with crosses, where Jesus will breathe his last. But, we go with hope, for we have witnessed the glory of God and we know that there is more to this story than suffering and death, we know that this path ends on yet another mountaintop, where we will meet the Resurrected Christ face-to-face.

So, as we begin this journey, open your life to transformation, and may the touch of Christ kindle something within us — the spark of hope, the fire of courage — so that we too may heed the call of Christ: Get up. Do not be afraid. Get up, and follow me.

⁵ See Matt 8:2-3; 9:20-22; 9:28-30

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the Cosmos, whose energy animates every living thing, we pray that you will calm our minds as we breathe deeply and drink in the air that surrounds us like your Spirit surrounds us.

As we inhale, may your Spirit saturate us. (*Inhale*)

As we exhale, may we release the thoughts that distract us. (*Exhale*).

We breathe in your essence. (*Inhale*)

We expel the extraneous. (*Exhale*)

We absorb the essential. (*Inhale*)

We discharge the irrelevant. (*Exhale*)

Holy God, we hear of Jesus encountering you on a mountain, and we yearn for an intense mountaintop moment with you. We hunger for a striking encounter that overwhelms our souls with awe and infuses our hearts with joy.

God, many of us are captive of the modern, scientific mindset that seeks a rational explanation for every experience and excludes your action from every event. Remind us that there are also powerful moments that defy easy explanations, feelings in our bones that spurn simple labels and outstrip all vocabulary. Taking in a glorious sunrise or gazing at the night sky and pondering the immensity of your creation can transcend all explanation. A soaring hymn or a sublime poem can grant us glimpses of eternity. The birth of a child or inexpressible love for another can flood us with feelings of gratitude for the holy moments of life.

Your radiance is so often hidden in our world; lurking directly before our eyes, but obscured by our dull vision. Awaken us to those fleeting moments of grace when your radiance shines through the ordinary and reveals the extraordinary – a conversation with a friend that lightens the heaviness of our soul, the surprise of spring flowers prying their way up through the brown earth, the family member who ignores our snide comment rather than taking the bait and breaking into a quarrel, the exuberant laughter of a child, the surge of courage to resist injustice, when forgiveness beckons us to quit blaming ourselves, when a calling to something new frees our feet from being stuck in the mud of the past, a shoulder to lean on, people from different tribes listening to each other and finding common ground, when laughter and joy invade the valley of the shadow of death.

Mighty God, life is infused with your radiance, and there are moments when the curtain is drawn back and we glimpse reality in all its mystery, in all its holiness, and in all its splendor. May we embrace these luminous moments and experience their transforming power to fill us with love and hope and peace.

Followed by the Lord's Prayer