

Mark 9:2-9 | **Transfiguration**

2 Kings 2:1-12 / Psalm 50:1-6 / 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 / Mark 9:2-9

*Preached on 11 February 2014 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church,
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Let us pray, Heavenly Father as your Son was transfigured in glory on the mountain, transfigure us your children, that we may pass from one degree of glory to another. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

Today we are commemorating the Transfiguration of Christ, one of the central events in the life of Jesus Christ. I use the word central advisedly because in the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the transfiguration on the mountain is a central hinge (see Matt. 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36). Jesus' ministry can be divided in two halves, the half leading up to the transfiguration and that which flows from the transfiguration. We ourselves experience such pivots in our own lives, after which life is different – a marriage, a death, a crisis, a baby, a move. The transfiguration is like such a pivot in the public ministry of Jesus.

It's an event that demands our attention. For not only does the transfiguration give shape and illumination to the life of Jesus, but in so doing it provides shape and illumination to our life too. As the Gospel says, Jesus was transfigured “before” or “in front of” the three chosen disciples. It was for them, for the church, and so also for us, for you, that Jesus was transfigured.

Who is Jesus?

Now in saying that the transfiguration is a central hinge of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it occupies that place along with a few other episodes that all occur together, and hang together.

The first episode is that Jesus asks his disciples ‘Who do people say that I am?’ and ‘Who do you say that I am?’ And it’s in response to that question that Peter responds: ‘You are the Messiah, the Christ’ (Mark 8:29). It’s a good answer, and one which Jesus praises in Matthew’s Gospel. Confessing that Jesus is the Christ is something that only the Father in heaven could have revealed to Peter. Just as our own confession of faith is a gift. And it’s also the answer to a question that has dominated the first half of Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s Gospel. Ever since his baptism, the question of ‘Who Is Jesus?’ is consistently raised and from all sorts of different quarters:

- The demons ask: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” (Mark 1:24)
- The scribes ask: “Why does this man speak like that? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7)
- The disciples ask: “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41)
- The crowds at the synagogue ask: “Where did this man get such wisdom? How are such mighty works done by his hands?” (Mark 6:2)

People are prompted to ask who this man is, because the first half of Jesus’ ministry has included powerful deeds and powerful words, and now Peter gives the good confession.

But then comes the other episode that goes with the transfiguration.

For the first time, Jesus predicts, or foretells, his death and resurrection. He does it just before the transfiguration and then for a second time just after the transfiguration, sandwiching the transfiguration between these two proclamations of his own suffering, death, and resurrection (Mark 8:31f; 9:30f). Both times he is met with incredulity first by Peter and then by the disciples. Peter

even rebukes Jesus for saying so, and then after the second prediction, we are told that the disciples simply “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him” (Mark 9:32).

They’re all confused, because up until this point, Jesus’ ministry has included powerful acts and powerful speech. But now Jesus foretells his suffering, death and resurrection. And not only his own suffering. He also extends his prediction to his disciples, and so to you, adding: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-5).

And it’s in this context that Jesus walks up the mountain, leading three of his confused disciples with him.

The Transfiguration

The transfiguration as an event is full of allusions to the Old Testament, providing a fuller answer to the question of ‘Who is Jesus?’

We hear that this happened “After six days” (Mark 9:2) which alludes to the six days of creation, and now the Sabbath rest, the holy day.

On this day of worship, in the presence of Peter, James and John, Jesus’ whole appearance is transfigured, changed, to radiate light, as he speaks with Moses and Elijah. And as Jesus shines in their midst, he is revealed not just to be like Moses and Elijah, but a new Moses and a new Elijah, greater than each, and the fulfilment of Israel’s history all in this one man, Jesus the Christ.

Moses had prophesied that God would raise up a prophet like himself (Deut. 18:15), and then in the book of Malachi God

proclaims: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (Malachi 4:4-5). That Jesus appears with both Moses and Elijah signals that the great day has arrived in the coming of Christ.

But Jesus outshines them both. His body gives out a light that is so bright it also extends to his clothes. The text literally says that no fuller, no professional cleaner, could bleach clothes so white. Jesus’ flesh is life-giving and light-giving. Something similar happened to Moses on Mt Sinai. He descended the mountain with a radiant face because he had been talking with God (Ex. 34:29), so that he had to put a veil over his face when talking with the people of Israel, lest others be afraid of Moses (Ex. 34:30). In other words, the brightness of Moses’ face could be concealed by a veil. But not Christ’s. Moses was more like a moon, in that he reflected the glory of God. But Christ’s radiance is like the sun itself, coming from within his divine body, and so strong that it shines through any garment he wears.

Peter, James and John were terrified, according to the text. They had been witnessing Jesus’ miracles, like walking on water, curing the sick, feeding the five thousand, calming the storm. Peter had just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ long awaited. But this is even more than what they had expected. In his shock, Peter reacted, or responded, by saying “Rabbi, it is good [or beautiful] for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Mark 9:5). That Peter says this almost as a reflex is instructive. The word dwelling is the same word for tent or tabernacle, the language of Jewish worship. When Moses first went up on Mt Sinai, God showed him the heavenly tabernacle, and gave him instructions for building such a place of worship on earth. Peter reflexively intuits that here is a new Mt Sinai, and a new

worship, focussed on the radiant presence of Christ, and so starts thinking about dwellings, tents.

And then a cloud overshadows them, just like the holy presence of God at Mt Sinai, or the glory cloud that led Israel in the desert and dwelt in their midst, and a voice from heaven declares: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Something similar happened at the baptism of Christ, with the Holy Spirit there coming not as a cloud, but as a dove, and both with the Father’s voice. But while in the baptism the Father spoke to Christ: “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11), now the Father is addressing the disciples, addressing the church: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9:7) Jesus Christ is the one to worship. Jesus Christ is the one to listen to.

The centrality of Jesus is only heightened when the disciples look around and see Jesus only. In Jesus the Old Testament is summed up; so too all of our life is summed up and finds its meaning and purpose in Christ. He is now the centre.

What are the first words that Jesus then speaks, after the Father has declared “listen to him!”? Our reading ends with this: “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (Mark 9:9). It’s perhaps not what we might expect. Jesus connects his glory to the resurrection, but between those two events will come something different. Unpacking this will also be an opportunity to receive the importance of the transfiguration for our lives.

Preparing for the Cross

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. We celebrate Transfiguration Sunday today because just as Jesus

came down the holy mountain in order to go to the cross, so too we are preparing to be renewed in taking up our crosses and following him.

The transfiguration is a preparation. The glory of Christ and the suffering of Christ go together. The transfiguration and the prediction of the cross go together. What does this mean? On the one hand, it shows that Jesus, the one who submitted himself to humiliation and beatings and death, was also the most powerful and almighty man who had ever lived, and indeed was God himself veiled in human flesh. This week I came across a Transfiguration prayer from Byzantine Greek Christians that reflects this. They pray:

You were transfigured on the mountain, and your disciples as much as they were capable of it, beheld your glory, O Christ our God, so that when they should see you crucified they would understand that your Passion was voluntary, and proclaim to the world that you truly are the splendor of the Father.

The Christ who died for your sins, died in power and in wilful self-giving.

And then, on the other hand, the combination of Christ's glory and suffering also says something about our lives, about what life in Christ looks like, and that God's glory is often hidden even in our lives, just as it was in Christ's life.

As Christians, who are baptized and believe in God, you have been giving a gift, a revelation that comes from the Father. And he has poured his Holy Spirit into your hearts, granting you already a good conscience by grace, as we repent and receive forgiveness, making you holy people, reflecting the glory of God.

And yet this glory is hidden, because we too walk in the way of suffering. As Paul and Barnabas put it, when they encourage the Christians at Antioch, in the Book of Acts: “It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). You are people who belong to God, who belong to the great kingdom of heaven, and we are awaiting the return of our king in glory. But our path to that kingdom is one of trials.

The transfiguration reveals Christ’s power, so that his suffering can be revealed in a new light. So too the glory that has been revealed to us, and the power of God which lives in you, means that you can approach your suffering in a new light. In life we will suffer, we will mourn, but not as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Jesus will suffer and die, but not as one who lacks glory, honour, power, wisdom or strength.

Who is Jesus? He is the fullness of God’s glory (cf. John 1:14, Hebrews 1:3) who suffers death and rose again for you. So that in Christ, you are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) that suffer trials and tribulations. As Paul puts it in Romans: you are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if we in fact suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17).

Peter and the disciples found it difficult to see Jesus’ glory and suffering together, but there is a beautiful coda to Peter’s difficulty. The letter of First Peter, ascribed to the apostle Peter, is one of the biblical books especially concerned with glory in suffering. It is there that we read the following encouragement:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing

Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13)

These words, ascribed to Peter, gets to the heart of our transfiguration joy. For we who live in Christ, live a life of veiled glory, a hidden transfiguration. We have received a foretaste of his glory by our graceful adoption as God's children, and so are now free to take up our cross and follow Christ in the way of the cross. For we know that just as Jesus's death is not the final word, nor will our death be the final word. For Christ is coming again, and, as it is written in Philippians, "He will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21).

That is the context of our suffering. That is the context of our life.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.