
The Transfiguration: From Tents to Transformation

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C

In the name of God, father, son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. We have come to the last Sunday after the Epiphany and as we do every year, we have read the story of the transfiguration, this year from the Gospel of Luke. The story is a familiar one. After telling his disciples that he must suffer, and die, and rise again, Jesus takes Peter and John and James up to the mountain to pray. He tells them they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow him, and then he takes them up to the mountain to pray.

What happens next, though familiar, is a galloping parade of scriptural symbols. They just seem to come at you in every sentence. It starts by referencing the eight days, which is an illusion to creation. Jesus' appearance changes while he's praying. Just as Moses' face did when he came down from Mount Sinai. Jesus' clothes become dazzling white just as they will appear in the empty tomb after his death. Moses, the giver of the law is there. Elijah, the prestigious prophet, which people thought would come back before the end of time is there.

They are talking to Jesus about his departure. The Greek word there is Exodus. They're talking to Jesus about his exodus and then just as it will or did at his baptism of voice comes out of the cloud and says, "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him." There can be no doubt, I think, that Luke intends to show that this is the ultimate epiphany, the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus as the Messiah is the ultimate showing forth of the God in Christ.

This is not the Messiah people expected, of course. He didn't ride in on a chariot to the sound of trumpets. It is instead the suffering servant anticipated by the prophet Isaiah who has come to be with the people to liberate and to heal. It is, if you will, a story of a new exodus of a new creation and those who follow Christ are to be new people. This is the moment when the depths of Jesus's divinity show forth through his humanity.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, offers a more contemporary image for this moment, this transfiguration. He cites the 20th century British cellist, Jacqueline du Pré, who was so brilliant in her performance of the cello that her fame spread throughout Europe. In particular, there's an interpretation of Elgar's cello concerto in E minor, which you can find on YouTube by the way, in which her interpretation is completely captivating. As her body begins to move to the music, you sense that she is energized by the rhythms; that she has come alive because of the music that she is playing, that she is literally being carried along. Her face begins to shine as if to glow with a new radiance. Her clothes even become a little white, Williams notes, as we are drawn into the music, and she is captivated by it. A more contemporary example of the epiphany, the idea of the divine light showing forth through the human form.

And yet, what the disciples are told is not just that this is Jesus the Messiah, but that they must listen to him. They must follow him. It's about them being drawn into this brilliance and changing as a result of it. It's about their taking on the journey of faith, and yet as you go through this journey, this idea of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others, we tend to find some resistance. You think we want that moment of transfiguration, but as we move to the journey that it calls us into, we can feel some resistance.

We're not alone. I'm going to identify three of them and show you that Peter went through these very same feelings. First: following Jesus requires that we give up some control over our lives. Now, I'm excited about the possibility of all of this, but remember what Peter did. In the moment of the transfiguration, Peter jumps up and as Peter's wont to do, says, let's build three dwellings erect three tents: one for Moses, one for Elijah, one for Jesus. Now, I don't know what Peter thought he was doing. Maybe he was thinking of the exodus and the Festival of Booths. Maybe he was thinking of the Greek tradition of building a shrine wherever a God was deemed to be present. Or maybe he was just thinking, this is out of control, and I need to do something about

it. I think it was probably the latter, and I don't think that's a foreign emotion. I think we all tend to feel it. We like Peter, are eager to be like Jesus, but we would prefer to do it all by ourselves. We would prefer to do it all by ourselves, and yet the call to follow Jesus, to pick up our cross daily, is to cede control over a portion of our lives.

Second: following Jesus requires that we confront him in some uncomfortable ways. So not just giving up control, but also engaging in a confrontation. Of course, again, we can look to Peter's life for what this might mean. Peter, you will remember, denies Jesus three times after Jesus is arrested and everything seems to be falling apart, but then after Jesus has risen, Jesus comes to Peter and restores him by asking him three times, do you love me? He doesn't just forgive him, he restores him. He helps Peter to be shaped in the image of Christ.

Now, I'm all about changing and being shaped, but I would prefer that Jesus come to me and tell me how good I'm doing. And instead, I find Jesus often shows up in those spots where I'm not doing so well. It is that confrontation that we are called to engage in, but we do so with the comfort that like Peter on the beach with Jesus, it will be love and restoration and forgiveness that we experience. We must engage in the confrontation, but it will end well if we can do it without fear. The thing is, as we allow God to shape us into the image of Christ, a lot of the action occurs where we're not yet there. It's just the nature of the path.

Third: Jesus requires us to be in right relationship with other people. At Pentecost, for example, Peter is on fire. He preaches the sermon of his life. He has everybody paying attention. It all seems to be going well, and then he is led to meet Cornelius. Do you remember this? Because Cornelius is a gentile, so this might not be who Peter was planning on preaching to, and yet he experiences yet another transfiguration. He experiences a new understanding of what it means to be in right relationship as he is in relationship to Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter's now no longer trying to build tents. He's stepping into the light of God's presence, leading others to transformation. We would often prefer to have transformation be something between us and God that happens in the private of our prayers or the quiet of our rooms, and instead, we are drawn into being in right relationship with others. In fact, we are drawn into allowing God to form us in the image of Christ for the sake of others; not just for the sake of ourselves and our own spiritual maturity, but literally for the sake of other people.

So these three moments of resistance, I want to lift up these signposts on this journey. We are called to be formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others, and at each moment of that journey, we will experience some resistance. Why is this important? Well, first we have the privilege of baptizing these wonderful children. What are they being baptized into but this same spiritual journey. The thing that we are agreeing to help them live into and through and be transformed by is the same spiritual journey that will incur the same resistances, but also, we're about to enter into Lent.

On Wednesday, we're going to be called into the observance of a holy Lent, and you'll have the opportunity once again to think about what spiritual practices you want to pursue. I encourage you this year to think of this not as punishment, not as something that makes you dower and something you must endure for God's approval, but instead, practices that will help you get past. Let go of, be free from, these resistances: control, fear of confrontation, doing something for the sake of others. These three things will open us for the presence of God. Allow that divine light that is in us to shine forth through us. It is a joyful prospect. We look forward to these children growing up in our midst, and I want you to look forward to the season of Lent where we will learn to overcome these resistances and become the light of Christ in the world. Amen.