

“A WHOLE NEW LIGHT”

Mark 9:2-9

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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February 11, 2018 - Transfiguration of the Lord

If someone who is not a Christian asked you to tell him or her what Easter is about, I am fully confident almost everyone of you could do it. Same thing for Christmas. I'm still betting on you for Good Friday, too, and I think you'd be in the ballpark on Maundy Thursday, Pentecost, and even All Saints Day. But when it comes to the Transfiguration of the Lord, I am only wagering someone else's money!

A lot of you could tell the story, I'm pretty sure - how Peter, James, and John hiked up to the crest of a mountain with Jesus and there saw his clothes turn dazzling white while Moses and Elijah suddenly manifested beside him and Peter went nuts with excitement and begged to build some houses so they could turn their peak experience into forever and then, as if all of that were not enough, they heard a voice from an overshadowing cloud declare about Jesus, “*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*”¹ A lot of you can tell the story. But when your inquisitor persists, “What is *that* all about?” that is when things perhaps get a little dicey.

Earlier in the week, Lori asked me what is going on in worship this week and I said it is Transfiguration Sunday and she said, “I *LOVE* Transfiguration Sunday!” In my whole life, she is the only one I ever have heard say that. Bear in mind I remember hearing William Sloane Coffin complain one year when he was at the Riverside Church in New York that he would just as soon have eye transplant surgery as preach on the Transfiguration. In Jamestown, I found others to preach on the Transfiguration sixteen of the eighteen years I was there and the only two times I did were the last two years when the other preachers had caught on to me and they just refused! The Transfiguration is demanding albeit an extremely important part of the Jesus story because it casts both Jesus and us in a whole new light. So, I throw caution to the wind today and dare to go where many preachers fear to tread.

¹ Mark 9:2-9, my paraphrase

Prior to the Transfiguration story in Mark, a lot had happened. Jesus had cast out demons. He healed lepers. He taught without consulting scholars or commentaries because he knew from deep inside himself the truth of which he spoke. He walked on water. He brought a little girl back to life. He fed thousands with only a few loaves and even fewer fish. Peter proclaimed of Jesus that Jesus is the Messiah. It all was very impressive. So it begs the question: What makes the Transfiguration so extraordinary that it gets its own Sunday in the church year and a permanent place in the liturgical calendar?

It is because, up on the mountain, the disciples saw Jesus in a whole new light and thus the hope of the church is that we can, too, as we hear and take the story to heart. (Remember in our calls to worship each week how we say, “Now is the time to give our hearts”? Presbyterians value the life of the mind but finally gospel truth is apprehended in our heart.)

The disciples thought they knew Jesus pretty well. Sometimes we think we know someone and then something happens with them and we see them in a way we had not seen before. That is what happened with the disciples on the mountain with Jesus. The disciples came to see Jesus at the Transfiguration in a whole new light.

Maybe Jesus himself even reached a new self-awareness. Jesus was not just a wonder-worker. He was not just a superb teacher. He was not just a preacher of pithy and provocative parables. He was not just a provocateur or burr in the saddle of the civil and religious authorities.

At the Transfiguration, Jesus is revealed again, as at his baptism, as the Son of God who is both the fulfillment of the law, symbolized by the presence of Moses, and the embodiment of the prophets, symbolized by the presence of Elijah. Both the law and the prophets advocated on behalf of and championed justice and compassion for those against whom the world discriminates and isolates. Thus, the most significant transfiguration that happened on that mountain may not have been the one that illumined Jesus but that illuminated and enlightened the disciples about Jesus. The disciples saw that the heart and character of God is present in Jesus.

Across the years some of the liberal and progressive members of previous churches I have served have thrown shade on the transfiguration story. (Let me hasten to add I am making no insinuations or claims today about the liberals and progressives in this one!)² My friends in those other churches say the transfiguration could not really have occurred and thus they dismiss it along with the claims the story makes about Jesus. If the story was not really true, they

² Spoken by a preacher seeking longevity in his present call!

rationalized, they did not have to believe it or learn from it. They respected the principles Jesus promulgated and they resonated with what they perceive to be his left-leaning take on things, but accounting him the Son of God and the Lord of the world was for them going too far. They consider themselves a little too sophisticated to believe such supernatural slurry.

But sometimes those at the left of center outfox themselves. Paul Ricoeur was a French philosopher and linguist who also was deeply interested in spiritual development. He as much as anyone has helped me to interpret scripture in what seems to me a credible and faithful way.

Ricoeur said in regard to scripture that when we first hear the Bible's stories we believe they are literally true. "The star stopped over the place where the baby Jesus lay,"³ for instance, as we read at Christmas. At first, we simply accept it. It is the Bible, after all. The stories in all of their details are literally true. Ricoeur calls this "the first naivete."

But as we grow a little older and more experienced in life the stories start to seem incredulous to us. "That could not really have happened," we murmur. As a result, some people become suspicious, skeptical, or dubious about the Bible and religion. We also find that science sometimes stands in the way of literalism. We enter what Ricoeur calls a "critical distancing" phase. We distance ourselves from biblical stories that seem magical, implausible, and unsophisticated. Sadly, some people get stuck in this stage and turn away from faith because they think it beneath them or it offends their intellect or they come to think of religion as "flimsy and whimsy."

But, if one allows the critical distancing phase to do its work of inviting questions and entertaining criticism and opening us to alternative possibilities and ways of interpreting and seeing, we finally move into the stage called "the second naivete." The second naivete takes a story and realizes it functions as symbol or metaphor. Second naivete affirms that while the story may not be literally or factually true, it nonetheless is deeply, eternally, and spiritually true.

In the second naivete, the meaning of the biblical stories takes precedence over the details of them, the literary over the literal. Even if the star did not literally stop over the place where Jesus lay, its meaning in the story is no less powerful than if it did: the birth of Jesus is a momentous event and Jesus is of utmost significance for the world. The second naivete allows us to retain the beauty of traditional language and story for why would we ever want to be rid of them? The second naivete suffuses the biblical stories with eternal wisdom and power for followers of Christ that only metaphor and poetry have the facility to touch in us.

³ Matthew 2:9

The second naivete allows us to understand many stories in the Bible as Spirit-inspired symbolism and metaphor. It allows our sacred stories to speak as powerfully today as they did when they came into being and helps to answer the question some people ask about why events that seemed to happen routinely in biblical times no longer happen. Symbol and metaphor keep the truth alive and current in every age.

The gospel writers were so not concerned with facticity and literalism in their stories as with proclaiming the faith of the early church that Jesus is the Son of God who is to be the center of our lives and the One by whom we understand ourselves and our mission in the world. Jesus is the One, the church preaches, to whom we are first and last to listen in our lives and is the One whose lead we are to follow. Jesus is the One who animates our lives and gives us our lives their meaning and purpose. Jesus, as the gospel writers insisted and for which the transfiguration is Exhibit A, is both God in human flesh and the true embodiment of what it means for us to be fully human. As the disciples did at the transfiguration, we see Jesus and thus also ourselves in a whole new light.

After the transfiguration, Jesus does not allow Peter, James, and John to linger long on the mountaintop but descends with his disciples to return to the cities and towns below. That is, Jesus said, where their ministry was. It is where our ministry is. It is not at the top of the mountain that Christians belong but in the valleys where people and nations who are in need of the resisting, restoring, renewing, reconciling power of God and the gospel are to be found.

The story tells us that, after the transfiguration, Jesus embarked on what today we call a Lenten journey that would lead him to the cross. Beholding Jesus as the Son of God with all of the authority the name conveys, we begin to see our lives in a whole new light because the Son of God *did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited but humbled himself⁴* and lived as a suffering servant in the world.⁵ Rather than seeking to avoid suffering at all costs, the disciples came to see and we come to see suffering as an inevitable part of the life we are called to live in Christ as we engage the principalities and powers of the world with the light and hope of the gospel.

I read in a recent issue of *The Christian Century* a compelling column by editor Peter Marty who wrote, *“When Karl Marx called religion the ‘opium of the people,’ he understood it to function like opium in an injured person: it reduced a sense of suffering and offered pleasurable illusions. But the Christian faith proposes just the opposite. Jesus never operated as the great palliative. There is no evidence of him pretending to be a pain reliever who showed up on earth to eliminate*

⁴ Philippians 2:6

⁵ The prophetic text of the Book of Isaiah foretells in several places the role suffering would play in the life and ministry of a coming Messiah.

*all suffering. In fact, he promised a cross for every one of his followers. Disciples who believed they would escape pain or misery by loving or obeying him were only fooling themselves...But, in Jesus, the Son of God, we know we have a companion in pain (whose love will not let us go)."*⁶

If Jesus were not the Son of God as the transfiguration affirms him to be, it is highly unlikely he would have had the courage, conviction, or constancy to make his steadfast journey to Jerusalem and to the cross and crucifixion. Like Jesus, we, too, in our baptisms are deemed to be the sons and daughters of God and we, also, are given the power of Christ's Spirit to make our journeys to our spiritual Jerusalems, forsaking no suffering along the way, and giving our all to the cause of the gospel of Christ.

When we see Jesus in a whole new light, as Peter, James, and John did on that transfiguration mountain, we also begin to see ourselves with fresh eyes as the suffering, yet finally joyful and grateful, servants of God.

May the transfiguration of the Lord also transfigure us that, like Jesus, we may live to the glory of God.

Amen.

⁶ Peter Marty, "Companion in Our Pain, *The Christian Century*, January 31, 2018 issue, p. 3.