

Transfiguration A: Matthew 17:1-9
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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In the popular *Harry Potter* books, the students at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry are all required to take a course in “Transfiguration.” There they learn how to turn teacups into rats or flowers into candles. And to most people’s minds that is pretty much what “transfiguration” is, too: it is a change of state from one thing into something quite different. And in fact, the Greek word used in this morning’s Gospel, “metamorphosis,” itself calls to mind astounding changes like caterpillars turning into butterflies or the book by Franz Kafka where the character wakes up one day only to discover he had turned into a giant beetle.

But none of those associations seems quite appropriate for what happened to Jesus on that mountaintop in today’s lesson. For, we don’t want to say that Jesus *changed* here from one kind of being into a completely different type. You see, for the better part of two millennia now, the church has struggled to hold in tension the idea that Jesus is one person but with two natures (fully human and fully divine), and that those two natures co-exist in Jesus without confusion, without mixture, without one altering the other, and so on (I’d point you to The Athanasian Creed in the back of your Prayerbook for an exceedingly thorough drubbing on this subject, if you’re interested.) But even without wading through that dissertation, we understand we can’t sign off on the idea that Jesus could switch from being human one moment to being divine the next, as if he hadn’t been both the whole time.

To avoid this, we could say that what happened on the mountaintop is that the divine nature was revealed, it rose to prominence in a way that had not generally been the case throughout Jesus’ earthly existence up to that point. Or we could say that for a few brief moments the Father showed the disciples what Jesus (as Son of God) had always looked like before he emptied himself, before he let go of certain divine traits so as to become incarnated as a human being. Either way, or both ways, it was not that Jesus became something different from what he was before. It was more the case that something that was a part of who he had been all along was displayed, revealed in a different way.

This is important for us to remember. Because when Jesus said things like “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” he didn’t mean just this one incident of blazing glory. He meant that divinity had been on display every day of his life. Divinity was on display when he spoke compassionately to ostracized women and outcast lepers. Divinity was on display when Jesus wept over a dead friend and when he healed the blind and lame. Divinity was on display when he argued with the Pharisees and when he turned over the tables of the moneychangers. It was on display even when, especially when, his body hung, maimed and broken on the cross.

This may strike many of us as odd, to say that Jesus’ divinity” was visible in his words and deeds, and not just in miraculous events, like this one on the mountain. We’d say: “Hold on a minute...Aren’t we talking about two different things here —the nature of God, God’s being, on one hand, and Jesus’ attitude towards people on the other.” One is essence...the other, ethics.

What I'm suggesting though is that they are one and the same, or rather that the two are intrinsically connected. Jesus' divinity is revealed not just in flashy spectacles like on this mountaintop but in how he treated others, his character.

The mountaintop light display then just reinforces what we see when Jesus is no longer on the mountaintop but is down in the valley, addressing the needs of the people. There we see that his essence is his ethics. His divinity is revealed in his deeds, his deeds of love. What we take from this is that loving is not just how God wants us to be, it's who God is—utterly self-giving, self-emptying.

If this connection still seems strange, and you need further proof, consider the name of the degree that we priests typically get before being ordained. It's not a Master of Theology or a Master of Religion, and certainly not a Master of Counseling or Social Work, but rather a Master of *Divinity*. We are go to school to study divinity, not just the divinity of God—that would be theology—but divinity in the sense of how we as Christians help each other to become more like Jesus, more compassionate, more self-giving, more truthful, more bold in our witness. The focus of our studies is on, or should be on, what it takes and what it means for us to become divine, that is, more like God. Understood this way, divinity isn't so much a 'state of being'—God is divine—as much as it is a way of being in the world, a way of being towards others, towards God and our neighbors.

This is important to understand. For, when Peter makes his impetuous suggestion that they capture the moment forever by building some shelters up there on the mountaintop, it's a foolish suggestion but not in the way we normally think it is. It's not that he's crazy for thinking he can just reach out and bottle divine radiance as though you were doing no more than capturing a firefly in a jar. If that were the case, then we'd just laugh at his absurdity, because it's more a matter of catching *lightning* in a jar, than lightning bugs! No, the true folly of Peter's suggestion stems from the fact that he didn't *need* shelters to capture what was going on up there: that same reality he experienced on the mountain had been with him and the other disciples from the very first day they met Jesus. It was the same Jesus, the same divine person with them all along.

This just shows how misguided Peter is in his response to the mountaintop revelation. He suggested that they build skene, or "tabernacles, tents." That is the same word John uses in the beginning of his Gospel to describe Jesus' coming into our world, becoming human. The phrase he uses is Jesus "tabernacled" in our midst. So, the *skene*, the tabernacles, that Peter sought had been with him in the "tent" of Jesus' flesh all along.

When the spectacle was over, Matthew says the disciples looked up "and saw no one except Jesus." But had anything really changed? The "day-glow Jesus" was gone but was the Jesus before them any less glorious than he had been a few moments earlier? No, he wasn't. Or what about when the light of his countenance would soon be dimmed by crucifixion and finally put out? Would he be any less glorious then, any less the true Son of God than in those few than in those few shining moments on the mountain? No, his divinity shined through even there, even on the cross.

You know, it's funny that this moment of Transfiguration—Jesus shining like the sun—always strikes us as being all about what can be *seen*, and yet, when God's voice thunders from heaven, what does he say? He says that the disciples must *listen* to Jesus! In other words, as amazing as the Transfiguration is, and as inspiring and encouraging as it may be for the disciples to see their suspicion of Jesus' divinity confirmed, for them to be fixated with what they saw is to miss the point. The vision only lasts a short time, and it's a privilege to witness it. But, if they listen to what Jesus says, God declares, they will discover windows on glory they had never before suspected were there. They will see beyond the spectacle, see behind the "veil of the visible," to the glory beneath.

Perhaps it's no different today. Our modern time is as enamored with outward glitz and glitter and eye-popping spectacles as any era has ever been. Our culture is obsessed with the spectacular, the superstars, the headline-makers. Even in church, we are drawn to megachurches full of attention-grabbing performances and glamour. But what this story points to is how glory, true glory, lurks in unexpected places and in generally humble wrappings. The same can be said of truth. It's not to be found among those with the loudest voices, or those with the greatest numbers. Glory—and truth—are not to be found blazoned on billboards or banners, but rather lurk in small gatherings of believers, among the poor in spirit and those persecuted for righteousness' sake, among the unpopular and unremarkable, in every believer who listens to and follows the words of Jesus. It's when we *listen* to the Word of Jesus, the Word written in Scripture, the Word preached, the Word passed among believers in conversations and counsel, the Word enacted in the sacraments—it's there that we start to *see* the glory we too often miss.

Curiously, Jesus tells the disciples to tell no one about what happened on the mountaintop until after he had been raised from the dead. But, of course, once Jesus was raised, he didn't stick around long. By the time the disciples were free to tell people about the event, they would not be able to point to Jesus in physical form. He had gone back to heaven by then and so all that would be left would be words and witness, his teachings to which people could listen.

That may not seem like much, when compared to such magnificent and awesome displays like the Transfiguration. I mean, we'd all like to join Peter and capture, or at least be able to point to, more conspicuous and impressive signs of glory. What we really are left to do, however, is to see the glory that surrounds us always whenever we hear and repeat the Word of Life that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, at the end of the day, we may not be able to turn teacups into rats, like the young wizards at Hogwarts. But the Word does promise to transfigure our world, nonetheless, to help us to reveal the glory of God to people who know only dim spectacles. Let us, therefore, attend to the words of Jesus, who said: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven." For that his show the glory of God is manifest. Thanks be God!