



## TRANSFIGURATION, 2008

***"Once the 'what' is decided, the 'how' always follows.  
We must not make the 'how' an excuse  
for not facing and accepting the 'what.'"  
– Pearl S. Buck***

*Scripture:*

**Matthew 17  
(see also, Luke 9)**

### *The Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor*

1. And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart.
2. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.
3. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.
4. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."
5. He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."
6. When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe.
7. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear."
8. And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.
9. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead."
10. And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"
11. He replied, "Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things;
12. but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands."
13. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.
14. And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and kneeling before him said,
15. "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water.
16. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him."
17. And Jesus answered, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."
18. And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.
19. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?"
20. He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you."

(Followed by the prediction of his death, and rising on the third day.)



## **"THE WHAT" BEFORE "THE HOW"**

As a prolog to this lesson in The Transfiguration of Jesus, I like this quotation from the writings of Pearl Buck.

**"Once the 'what' is decided,  
the 'how' always follows.  
We must not make the 'how'  
an excuse for not facing  
and accepting the 'what.'"**

How many times have we been in a meeting thinking about "the what," when someone steps in with a reason that they believe will prevent "the how" from happening. Infant ideas are lost and discussion is dynamited. It is pretty clear from the newspaper that Microsoft had decided what they wanted with regard to Yahoo and Google, and that they left it to attorneys to determine how.

The lesson about The Transfiguration of Jesus is a story about what would happen to the Messiah if he went to Jerusalem. History determined the how, but most historians say that once this decision was made on the mountaintop and revealed to Jesus' disciples, nothing could alter Jesus' collision course with Pilate, Caiaphas and Herod in Jerusalem.

## **THE MISSING DIAMOND**

One of the largest departments in our church is the Lost and Found Department. It is not uncommon for someone to come dashing down the hallway on Sunday, or dialing the office on Monday morning at 9:00 a.m. looking for a lost treasure. I lost my earring, my car keys, my wallet, \$200 in cash. (Likely story.)

A woman looked down at her precious wedding ring. Suddenly she realized that she had lost the large diamond from the center. Her eyes began to fill with tears as she showed the ring and its empty prongs to her husband. "It's gone," she said.

"How did you lose the diamond?" her husband asked.

"I'm not really sure when or how." She said, "I looked down and the diamond was gone. The stone had slipped out of the setting."

As tears flowed down her cheek, she slipped the ring with the missing stone from her finger and showed it to her husband. "Look," she said. "Now, the ring is completely worthless. In defiance, I am

going to continue wearing the ring as a reminder to myself and everyone else of what I have lost."

Several days later her husband asked her again about the ring with the missing stone. "What did people say about your missing diamond?" he asked.

"So far, no one else has noticed," she said.

The stone of her ring was lost, but the marriage it represented was not. Value and worth are not always the same. Today's lesson is about value and worth.

## **LENT BEGINS**

In the Bible, when a story takes us up to a mountaintop, it's a fair bet that something dramatic is going to happen. Indeed, it's a fair bet that something deeply revelatory is going to happen. Our lesson today proves the rule. Three disciples were privy to the event. It's difficult to know from the text whether Jesus himself was expecting this glorious appearing of Moses and Elijah. He does not seem surprised that it happened but neither is there any indication that he went up to the mountain to do anything other than pray.

In terms of value, this is the big lesson.

Please take a look at the Raphael painting of The Transfiguration which we have placed on the bulletin cover today. Can you identify the figures?

Jesus took Peter, James and John to a high mountain. Jesus was transfigured before them. His clothing became white while Jesus appeared before his most trusted disciples in the company of Elijah and Moses.

Elijah and Moses were the most distinguished of the Hebrew prophets and patriarchs. Jesus' three disciples were there too. They did not know what to say. Peter said, "Let's build some tents." If you don't know what to do, build something. Guys think that way.

**A voice was heard among them saying,  
"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him."  
How many people long for those words  
all of their lives? This is my child,  
and I am proud of him/her.**

We call this event, *The Transfiguration*. The Transfiguration is mentioned in three of the four gospels, and it is referenced by both Peter (2 Peter

1:16-18) and Paul (I Corinthians 3:18). The story of The Transfiguration was well known among the disciples. In fact, this may be the moment in which Jesus became the Christ. The divine presence, the statement of mission, and the blessing of the Almighty are all part of this moment.

**Jesus came down from the mountain  
different from the way he went up.**

### **WHY MOSES?**

Moses had known his own transfiguration experience on Mt. Sinai. Moses and his audience with God on the mountain is the most famous transfiguration in scripture. Jesus encountered the presence of Moses on that mountain.

### **WHY ELIJAH?**

Elijah had a similar experience. Elijah sought refuge at Mt. Sinai when his wife, Jezebel, threatened to kill him. Like Moses, Elijah experienced the divine presence on Mt Sinai accompanied by lightning and thunder. Elijah complained that his experience as a fugitive fearing for his life was a poor reward for his zeal in defending God. God's voice spoke to Elijah on the mountain, and eventually Elijah returned to the Jezreel Valley to lead the overthrow of the religion of Baal.

The Jews believed that Elijah would return at the end of days to decide between good and bad Rabbis. It was thought that Elijah would proclaim the coming of the Messiah. So one of the questions asked of John the Baptist was, "Are you Elijah," coming to proclaim the Messiah?

The voice proclaiming that Jesus was God's son sounds like baptism - a second baptism. This time, it was on the mountain, not in the water. The Transfiguration was not rebirth from water, but identity born of vision.

It is hard not to compare this story to a political endorsement for a candidate for public office by "the distinguished senator from..." or "the venerable governor of ..." However, these are spiritual leaders imbedded deeply into the pattern of faith, so we would have to reach into history, and into

spirituality, and into faith building to find genuine parallels.

This story will be the prolog to the most important days in Jesus' ministry that lie ahead. Moses, Elijah, and now Jesus all had mountain top experiences with the almighty. It changed their lives forever. Some say this is the moment when Jesus bid farewell to his disciples, and became a new man whose destination was Jerusalem and whose destiny was now sealed.

### **ALTERED LIVES**

This experience was important for Jesus, but we read it because it is important to us.

**I have felt a Presence that disturbs me with Joy  
Of elevated thoughts; A sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply infused;  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
The round ocean, the living air, the blue sky  
And in the mind of mind....**

(William Wordsworth)

### **IN SEARCH OF THE MOUNT OF THE TRANSFIGURATION**

There are several possible sites for The Transfiguration, and I like this scripture because it is so rooted in geography.

One of them is **MT. CARMEL** which is just south of Haifa, and it the place where Elijah killed the prophets of Baal. It has a commanding view of the Jezreel Valley, as well as an Israeli Air Force Base and listening posts. Elijah was there. Perhaps Jesus was there, too.

Another is **MT. HERMON** on the border with Syria, Lebanon and Israel, above the Golan Heights. At the top of the mountain there are skiers this morning looking down into all three countries, and from the top you cannot see the international borders. It is the source of fresh water for the Holy Land. Maybe it was a source of living water for Jesus.

But the traditional site is called **MT. TABOR**. Who am I to disagree? It is a hump in the crust of the earth at the south end of the Jezreel Valley. It is not volcanic, but it is a natural prominence from which you can see the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the farms and fields and the valleys that lead to the Jordan River. On a clear day you can see forever.

That may be why tradition places The Transfiguration here.

### **A TAXI TO THE TOP**

I have told you about my wild taxi ride to the top of Mt. Tabor in a stretched Mercedes, haven't I?

(Well, here's the short version. The road is too narrow for the buses. I think it is also too narrow for a stretched Mercedes in the hands of a wildman. There are steep ledges on every side of the road to the summit. From the back seat, I asked our driver just how fast he thought this car could go. Because of subtleties in language, I don't think he knew that I was being sarcastic. The driver took my question more as a challenge. It was a thrill ride I will never forget.)

At the top of the mountain, I walked to a monastery on a cobblestone road past beautiful flowers and gardens. The monastery is a Byzantine fortress built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. I was greeted by a priest. He was a Franciscan priest from California who was on temporary assignment there. Small world.

It is peaceful on the top of Mt. Tabor. I went inside the large basilica. Inside the church there is a massive mosaic on the floor that depicts Jesus transfigured. And on the afternoon I was there, I remember a shaft of light pouring through a stained-glass window. The beam of light crept down the wall and fell upon this mosaic stone image of Jesus. The light made Jesus' face shimmer with a dazzling brilliance as the light exploded into tiny, blinding bits of gold reflected from the tiny stones in the mosaic. I lifted my hand to protect my eyes from the blinding reflections.

It was a golden moment, and then the light moved on. "What was that all about?" I thought.

But the golden moment did not pass. I can still remember it.

Was that passing moment of clarity a transfiguration, too? I choose to remember it that way. For me it is the memory that not everything needs to be explained in order for it to have meaning.

So I choose to remember The Transfiguration of Jesus as a moment of clarity, purpose and destiny, on a mountain, somewhere, with the company of a great spiritual presence that connected past to future.

### **REMEMBER**

Today I want you to think about the "whats" in your life, the big ideas.

- What would you like the politicians to accomplish?
- What unclimbed mountains are there ahead of you?
- What peace do you need to reach?
- What skill do you need to further develop?
- Where do you need to go?

You don't need to be anyone's messiah to think this way.

### **MORE THAN THE MINIMUM**

You can't unring a bell, and you can't unsay the words you have spoken.

You can't change an opportunity that you have missed.

You can look at something from another viewpoint.

We can always do more than the minimum.

If all you have is history, then you have no future. Lent is about the future. You can't have your old life back. This is our lesson from the desert last week.

But as Frederick Buechner says, there are moments of transfiguration in all our lives. No, not exactly on a par with what happened to Jesus. Yet ... "Even with us something like this happens once in a while. The face of the man walking with his child in the park, of a woman baking bread, of sometimes even the most unlikely person listening to a concert or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing." (From "Beyond Words" by Frederick Buechner, Harper San Francisco 2004).



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**February 3, 2008**