

“Transfiguration”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 9:28-43a

Have you ever thought you knew somebody, only to find out that they weren’t who you thought they were? It can be a disturbing, disappointing experience. We often face this let down when our heroes stumble and fall: the star athlete admits using to performance-enhancing drugs; the spouse or the parent or the child surprises us by revealing a side of themselves we did not know and do not like.

In these moments of awkward discovery, we can feel betrayed by the person who turned out to be different from what we thought, but we can also feel betrayed by ourselves – by our faulty perceptions and assumptions – to the extent that we begin to question our own judgment and cease to trust ourselves, which can be the most disorienting, hurtful experience of them all.

We have no way of knowing what Peter and James and John expected as they trudged up the mountain with Jesus, what they had in mind as they made their way up the stony path. Maybe Jesus had some secret teaching he was only willing to divulge to a select few. Perhaps this was a rare privilege to join Jesus in the private prayers he so often sought in out of the way places. Whatever their speculation, it’s hard to believe that any of them had anticipated anything like what ended up happening.

Sure, they’d seen Jesus do some amazing things: exorcising demons; healing the sick; stilling storms; confounding the hyper-pious, self-righteous know-it-alls. Yet it’s hard to see how they could have been prepared for what they encountered on that high mountain, where Jesus changed, his appearance becoming a dazzling white. As if this wasn’t amazing enough, there was more.

Elijah and Moses appeared: two of the major prophets of the Jewish faith, long since gone, but now on Earth again, speaking with Jesus. I've wracked my brain trying to come up with some contemporary equivalent, like a Civil War buff seeing Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Ulysses S. Grant talking in the parking lot, or a baseball fan bumping into Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, and Cy Young playing catch. But there's simply nothing that comes close to how those disciples must have felt to be in the presence of Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus.

Naturally, they wanted to preserve the moment. Just as we would whip out our cell phones to record the event for posterity, Peter suggested that they build booths, simple shelters meant to honor Jesus and his revered guests. There was probably an ulterior motive behind Peter's suggestion. Instead of "build it and they will come," he might have been, "build it and they might stay." We make structures to contain things, to preserve things.

During this instant of transfiguration, when Jesus' identity was confirmed beyond all doubt by his conversation with these great leaders of the past, Peter wanted to control what was happening. Perhaps he was afraid that without some structure to bring order to this amazing occurrence things would get out of hand, and his fears were well founded.

The transfiguration revealed something very new and unexpected about Jesus, and it must have scared the stuffing out of Peter, James, and John. These, apparently, were the brightest and best of the twelve Jesus kept around him, but even they were utterly overwhelmed by this extraordinary epiphany. After John baptized Jesus in the Jordan, he emerged from the wilderness and called some people to follow him, and they did, dropping everything to go who knows where. Then, he taught wisely and cast out demons and healed people and did all sorts of remarkable things. He argued frequently with the religious elite, who grew increasingly angry.

His own family thought he might be going crazy. And now this, on the top of a high mountain, with Jesus and Moses and Elijah; it was too much, too fast, too soon.

And that's the path of discipleship each of us walks, whether it's up a high mountain or down into a dark valley or across the flat sunny meadow. It's a journey of change, where we constantly discover new and exciting and occasionally disturbing things about Jesus. And we can sometimes feel betrayed by these fresh revelations of who Jesus is, frustrated that we thought we had him pinned down pretty good, only to realize people have tried to pin him down before, some getting so desperate that they finally tried nailing him to a cross, and even that didn't work, because there's more to Jesus than meets the eye. In fact, the more we get to know him, the more we come to know that he's a mystery beyond our knowing; a person we can know only in part.

This is true of every person we know, which is why often find ourselves deflated to discover that someone isn't who we thought they were. No spouse, no matter how long they've been married, truly knows their mate inside and out. No parent, no matter how attentive and diligent, ever has a precise bead on who their child is. And so it is with Jesus. Our knowledge of him naturally remains incomplete.

However, that partial knowledge of Jesus gives us everything we need to follow him faithfully. That partial knowledge gives us everything we need to rest assured in our salvation and to share the good news of salvation boldly, in word and deed, to all whom we meet.

Yet our knowledge of Jesus will always remain partial, because his greatness exceeds the grasp of our minds and souls. That is why we must remain wary of those too eager to declare their absolute certainty about holy things. Such folks have lost the vital element of humbleness that accompanies a faith in the true Christ, who always reserves the right to surprise us.

We see how Jesus does this, time and again, throughout history. For centuries, goodhearted Christians just knew that Jesus wanted people to follow him so badly that he wouldn't mind if Jews and Muslims were forcibly converted at the point of a sword, but over time, people began to see a freedom in the transfigured and Risen Christ that showed how wrong they were to do that.

For centuries, well-meaning Christians just knew that Jesus agreed with them that some people were simply better than others and that the quality of a person's character could be judged by the color of their skin, an attitude that resulted in racism and the practice of slavery. But over time, people started to realize that the transfigured and Risen Christ died for all people, and that the grace given for all was the great equalizer that prohibits and makes ridiculous pretensions of superiority on the basis of where somebody's from or what they look like.

Just imagine, over time, what else the brightness of the transfigured and Risen Christ might reveal to us. What solid certainties we treasure now will turn out to have been nothing more than silly assumptions, once the light of Jesus disperses the shadows of our confusion? And it's not because Jesus is changing, so much as Jesus is changing us, by constantly revealing more of who he is, just as he did with his original disciples, who came to know him by degrees as a teacher, an exorcist, a healer, a fierce debater, and finally as a Messiah who would conquer, not by putting people on a cross, but by allowing himself to be nailed there instead.

The transfiguration is that moment when all of the brightness of Jesus Christ comes into focus, and we realize that the more he seems to change, the more he stays the same, and it is actually us, who over time, must alter our perceptions of who he is and accept the transfiguration Jesus offers us, so that we might become more like him. It is us, who time and again, must repent and return to the Lord, changing our beliefs and practices so that we might become more faithful

followers of him. When we accept the grace to do these things, we find greater truth, and in greater truth, a higher wisdom, and in higher wisdom, fuller peace, and peace brings us more bountiful joy, and joy open our hearts to a love that surpasses all understanding, and in that love, transfiguration occurs. Amen.