

This is My Son, Listen to Him

This is that day in the church year when we celebrate Christ's transfiguration. Here's something for you to think about. Did you know that the Greek word translated as "transfiguration" is the word "metamor-phothe," from which we get the word "metamorphosis"? A dictionary defines metamorphosis as "a transformation, a complete change of appearance and form." The best example we have of metamorphosis is the transformation of a lowly caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. (1)

That process has thrilled people through the ages. Butterflies are beautiful and fascinating. Because of their striking beauty, butterflies are often seen in works of art. Because of the mysterious process by which they change from ugly caterpillars to beautiful butterflies, they are often seen as a symbol of new life, or even the resurrection of Christ!

In ancient times a butterfly was seen in Japan as the personification of a person's soul; whether they be living, dying, or already dead. (2)

But the butterfly can have many meanings. One Japanese superstition says that if a butterfly enters your guestroom and perches there, the person whom you most love is coming to see you.

In Chinese culture, two butterflies flying together symbolize love.

Some people say that when a butterfly lands on you it means good luck. Maybe some of us need to plant butterfly gardens.

There is an old story about two caterpillars who are watching a chrysalis. A chrysalis is to a butterfly what a cocoon is to a moth. Suddenly the chrysalis bursts open to reveal a beautiful butterfly that stretches its wings and flies away. One caterpillar turns to the other and says, "You'll never get me up in one of those things."

Well, in the wonderful way God has created the world, that caterpillar will, sooner

or later, "get up in one of those things."

I too, have a butterfly, transformation, story. I know I have shared this with you many times. It's about Herbie, a young man of 25, who lived out most of his life with the debilitating disease of Muscular Dystrophy. I came to know Herbie from the nursing home. He came to us on a ventilator, contracted up like a pretzel, bound to his bed, and chained to his machine that was his life line. While Herbie was in the nursing home, we watched him grow spiritually. He was Catholic and would attend church services by having 3-4 people push his bed and cart with the ventilator in unison to the chapel. Herbie hadn't joined the Catholic church before he entered the nursing home, but he desired to do so. So Herbie asked one of the nursing home residents to be his Sponsor. What an honor and blessing to witness this happen in the likes of a nursing home. I mentioned that Herbie's faith blossomed while in the nursing home. I had many discussions with him about his desire to walk again. But he knew his reality would be that this would not occur in his lifetime, but would occur after he died. He was not afraid of death, and welcomed the day he would no longer be tethered to a machine that would breathe for him, and he looked forward to walking again, only this time, with Jesus.

Herbie died suddenly, unexpected one evening. I was overwhelmed and saddened by his death. It was a huge loss for staff, and residents as they had all adopted this young man into their family and community of the nursing home. The day after his death, I awoke with the words "Now you can fly like a butterfly, Spread your wings and fly so high. The lessons in life you taught so well, God touched your soul, You came out of your shell." It was early morning and I was not a morning person, so I told myself that those words would make a great song, and I would remember them to work on later. But, as I have told you in the past, those words kept getting louder and louder, and I could no longer ignore them, so I got up and found a pen and paper and the words of the song flowed out of the pen without me even thinking. I was a bit overwhelmed, bewildered, and awestruck, because I knew those words were not mine, they in fact, came from God. I knew that God was telling me that Herbie was ok, that he had indeed transformed. He had shed his shell of a body, that had been weighted

down with chains. He was free, just like a butterfly that had shed its cocoon.

Also working in the nursing home, I have had countless interactions with residents as they are near end of life. On many occasions, they have told me that they could see loved ones who had passed on, or even angels, surrounding them by their bedside. I do not doubt their witness, as the veil grows thin from this earthly life as their time draws near. Again, another witness to a transformation.

I think it's interesting that the term indicating the transfiguration of Jesus should be so close to the term describing the metamorphosis of a butterfly. This can help us appreciate how dramatic the change in Jesus' appearance was on that mountain when he was with his closest disciples Peter, James and John. I am not saying that Christ's transfiguration was anything like the metamorphosis of the butterfly. [He certainly didn't sprout wings and fly off the mountain like Superman.] But, something happened that day, something his disciples would never forget.

You know the story. One day Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain. Suddenly and quite dramatically on that mountain Jesus was transfigured right in front of them. Suddenly his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. In Luke's Gospel the word used to describe Jesus' dazzling appearance is the same word that is used to describe lightning. It is an amazing scene. If we can visualize it in our minds, we will experience a sense of awe.

It reminds me of a similar scene in the Old Testament in Exodus 34. Do you remember that day when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments? Moses came down the mountain having been in the presence of God. Quite mysteriously his face shone so much reflecting the glory of God that he had to wear a veil. His face was so radiant the people were afraid to come near him.

That's interesting, don't you think? In the same way when Peter, James and John were on the mountain with Jesus, his clothes became dazzling white. But that's not all. Not only did the disciples see Jesus transfigured, but they also saw two of the Old Testament's premiere figures, Elijah and Moses, with him. Elijah and

Moses were talking with Jesus.

This was more than the disciples could process. Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Mark tells us, “[Peter] did not know what to say, they were so frightened.” I am sure that Peter was mystified at what he had just witnessed.

And then, as if things had not gotten mysterious enough, a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

I don’t know about you, but if I heard a voice coming out of a cloud, I would question my sanity. But the three disciples were probably already in a state of shock. Jesus transfigured Moses and Elijah there in their presence now this voice from a cloud. It was more than they could possibly take in.

Then suddenly, Mark tells us, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. That’s significant. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. After God announces that Jesus is His Son, Moses and Elijah disappear and Jesus alone remains. The Law and the Prophets have served their time and pass away, but Jesus, who is the fulfillment of both the Law and the Prophets, remains. What happened on the mountain was a visual representation of what Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.” The Law and the Prophets had served their purpose, but the time of the Messiah is at hand.

What a magnificent event this event of the transfiguration was. And only Peter James and John were privy to it. We don’t know why this honor was accorded only to them unless the answer is found in the last verse of Mark’s account: “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

It could very well be that, if the other disciples had been there, they wouldn’t have been able to keep the secret. So only Christ’s three closest associates beheld his glory on the mountain that day, but they were sworn to secrecy until

after Christ's death and resurrection.

This was certainly an astounding occasion. The disciples were confronted with Christ in a new and exalted way. But the most important part of that scene was at the end when the voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

The voice that came from the cloud was for us as much as it was for the Peter, James and John, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Listen to him, first of all, when he says what is critical in life. What is critical for living the Christ-life? You already know **love for God** and **love for our neighbor**. Everything else in life is of secondary importance to those two commands. We love our neighbor because we love God.

What does such love look like? Let me tell you about a young lady named Hope Stout. When she was twelve years old Hope was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer. Hope came to the attention of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. You know about that organization. It works to provide joy to children with terminal illnesses. What a wonderful ministry. The Make-A-Wish Foundation contacted 12-year-old Hope about fulfilling one of her wishes. In a moment of selflessness that is simply awe-inspiring, Hope Stout wished for just one thing: that every kid on the Make-A-Wish list would get their wish granted before she did. To me, this is amazing. She wished that every kid on the Make-A-Wish list would get their wish first.

Inspired by Hope's example, the organizers at Make-A-Wish kicked into overdrive, raising funds and gathering volunteers to fulfill the wishes of 155 children who were on the list ahead of Hope. They had almost raised enough money to grant every child's wish when, in January 2004, Hope passed away. But her example still inspires the organization today, and they are working diligently to see that every child gets his or her wish fulfilled as soon as possible. (3)

Why did she do it? This little girl could have asked for almost anything in the world. Why did she give it all up for the sake of others? In Hope's selfless, extravagant, loving decision, we catch a glimpse of God's ultimate plan for

humanity. Love God. Love your neighbor. Listen to Jesus when he says that this is what is critical in life. On the last day, this is how you will be judged not on the basis of how much you've accumulated, not on the basis of how many marathons you've run, not on the basis of how many degrees you've earned. These things will all be as dirty rags. The only question you and I will be asked is how well we've loved.

Also listen to him when he explains who our neighbor is. Not just the people in our family, not just the people in our neighborhood, not just the people who look like us or think like us. Everyone is our neighbor.

Have you gotten the message that you have been set free? Have you gotten the message that you can be transformed? Listen to him: "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away." He's talking about you and me. Listen to him. Whoever you are or whatever you've done, transformation is possible. Listen to him. Quit living like a caterpillar. Allow him to turn you into a beautiful butterfly. We are not called to remain in the state that God found us, but to feed on His word and grow. Let him transform you today.

1. Melvin Newland,
<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/glory-and-majesty-melvin-newland-sermon-on-transfiguration-32723.asp>.
2. Lafcadio Hearn, Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things.
3. Reader's Digest, May 2004.