

Transfiguration
Sunday Before Lent
February 3, 2008
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Shine, Jesus, Shine
Matthew 17:1-9

“And he was transfigured before them,
and his face shone like the sun.”
Matthew 17:2

The story of the Transfiguration is like a mile marker on the road to Lent, a road whose destination is the cross.

A surprising, oasis like story, on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, and the sun-scorched desolation waiting for us next Sunday in the story of the Temptation in the Wilderness.

Yet this story of Jesus shining with the glory of God on the mountaintop is so brief, so startling, it is hard to comprehend, particularly to comprehend any lasting effect – so it is soon put aside as we journey the more familiar path through Lent.

We know that Lent has little glory in it, has more to do with death than with life.

A bleak time, leading inevitably to the cross.

And then here is the Transfiguration, standing on the verge of Lent, just like a feast before the long, dry fast.

Like Fat Tuesday, Mardi Gras, the day before Ash Wednesday.

We know Mardi Gras leads to nothing but a day-after hangover.

Where does the Transfiguration lead?

Let's see if we can find out.

What happened, anyway – in this story of heroes long dead, and glory shining from the face of Jesus?

I have read so many attempts by scholars to rationalize the Transfiguration into something “understandable.”

It was a dream --- a story made up by the disciples after the resurrection --- a vision Jesus alone had, which he told them about --- and on and on.

Yet not one of the rationalizations touches the power of that event.

Does it matter that we do not understand?

The issue is not understanding, not even belief, the issue is transfiguration, of Jesus, of the disciples, and our transfiguration too – our transfiguration when we too see the shining face of Jesus!

Admit it! Transfiguration is something we seldom experience in our lives.

I was struck in the sermon last Sunday with the realization that Jesus never asked his followers to believe in him. He always asked them to follow him.

I sometimes think the Christian faith puts too much emphasis on individual belief and acceptance.

On belief and acceptance as individual intellectual assent and individual emotional experience.

With not enough attention paid to action! To following him.

Moses went up a mountain, and there the glory of the Lord was revealed to him.

The purpose of that revelation was not to change Moses – to make him more spiritual, more loving, etc.

The purpose of that revelation was to transfigure the way of living of a whole people.

So it was with Jesus.

Jesus did not take a mountaintop vacation to “get-away-from-it-all,” to rest, refresh, renew himself.

Jesus was transfigured on the mountain to meet what was waiting for him down in the valley.

The transfiguration was not a “break” away from the suffering of the world – but a gift in God’s grace, the same God who was pushing Jesus deeper and deeper into the pain and darkness of a suffering world, until that pain and darkness culminated in the cross.

The glory of God did not shine from the face of Jesus on the mountaintop, then go out.

God made Jesus shine through the deepest darkness the world has ever known.

Peter wanted to set up tents on the mountaintop – to camp out there, to stay there and bask in the glory.

But the shining face of Jesus on the mountaintop was a declaration that the glory of God is not something you wait for, hunt for, seek –

rather it is God’s choice to fill a tired, aching, agonizing world with glory – **glory wherever God’s people do God’s work** – there Jesus shines.

The Transfiguration is not a vision of the way the world could be, it is a promise of the way the world already is, when God’s people live for others, as Jesus did.

Peter wanted Jesus to stay on the mountaintop and shine on the faithful few – Jesus knew that the light of God’s glory was not for the mountain, and not for the few. God’s light was needed to shine in the valley below, where a child waited to be healed, a crowd waited to be fed, disciples were arguing about who’s number one – down in that lonesome valley Jesus which Jesus would walk to the cross.

Many years ago, when I was young -- I took part in the funeral of a minister.

A minister one year younger than myself.

In the midst of the tears, there was light.

He died shining in faith, and his dying united a people in love.

In the love and actions of his people, over his last year, to support and love him and his family far beyond any requirement or expectation, there was light, shining with the glory of God.

In some way, all of us who lived through his last, hard year were transfigured.

Moments of transfiguration, whenever and however they come, are times when the glory of God is so real – these are not moments to be cherished, hoarded, saved – they are times to change you to live on in a different way even when the moment is gone.

For how will the light of Jesus shine, unless it shines through us?

The question to be asked of every transfiguration, every conversion, every burst of enthusiasm, is: does it change you and enable you to live for God?

Believing is only the beginning

It is not by our beliefs nor by our words that the presence of Christ in our lives will be judged.

But by the transfiguration our vision of his shining face causes in us, in our lives and actions.

Will we live for him?

“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun.”

Shine, Jesus, shine. Shine in me.

Amen.