

"Metamorphic Jesus" (26Feb17)
Matt17:1-9; 2Pet1:16-21

My first year of seminary I had to do a project on Luke's version of this Transfiguration passage. I still resent it, like having to deal with divorce verses in a first preaching class. This is such an unusual story, and even experts don't really know what it's about or what it means or why it's there. Now (if I'm one of the so-called experts) I could list off some details and stuff to try to explain it, in that clever way of at least creating some smokescreen for not really knowing what's going on.

I'll try it. An observation to begin, then, is that this is a turning point in the Gospel stories. In the previous chapter, Jesus predicted his death for the first time. Peter had identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, as God's chosen or anointed one. Peter was praised for that faithful discernment, but went on to blow it by arguing with Jesus that of course the Messiah must not, couldn't possibly die. We'll return to today's version of blundering Peter. But to keep on with more explanation, if the previous chapter pointed to Good Friday's death on the cross, the Transfiguration might similarly begin to point to Easter's resurrection.

Or this may mark a transition in the story where the rubber is really about to meet the road. Jesus is going to draw more conflict as he's opposing the rulers. This passage, then, could be a little pause, a momentary interlude vacating, as it were, to the Smoky Mountains.

Or, rather than the diversion of a bright and cheery spiritual getaway, it might highlight the looming showdown, a big flashing light that draws your attention to the clash. That might be why Moses and Elijah appear. See, nobody is much too certain about what they're doing there—other than the fact that they're the two big name Old Testament personalities, almost

alone embodying the scriptural traditions of law and prophets—nor is it clear how Peter recognized them or what kind of discussion they would've been having with Jesus. But we *could* highlight that both Moses and Elijah spent time on a mountain while running into testy conflicts with political leaders. For Moses it was on the other side of skirmishing with Egypt's Pharaoh, and for Elijah as he was fleeing for his life from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of Israel. So Jesus up the mountain may not necessarily be a majestic mountaintop experience of spiritual enlightenment; it may, rather, be the setting indicating a political showdown.

To change theme, for us Lutherans, this festival of Transfiguration is always on this final Sunday of the season of Epiphany and last Sunday *before* Lent begins. For the Epiphany season, it bookends a shining star, with magi seeking the Messiah and then sneaking away to keep another nasty king from hunting him down. The first Sunday of Epiphany gave us God's voice echoed today, as the voice from the cloud at Jesus' baptism also announced "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It's a nice reiteration and today God makes one addition, wrapping up the declaration with an instruction, "Listen to him." So with this reading we look back through the season of Epiphany.

And we also look forward toward Lent, and beyond that to Easter. I used to figure this was a brief, shining celebration before the drudgery of Lent. It is a stark contrast between the dazzling white today and the blackness of an ashen smudge that will mark us on Wednesday. This may feel like a little party to carry us through a somber season, a feast before the fast, with the last of joyful Alleluias before they are shut up for a time. Again, this might forecast radiance that awaits us as Easter dawn comes, especially hinted in Jesus' concluding

words that his followers weren't to talk about this until after he was raised from the dead.

If Jesus' words are oddly ominous, there's little way to hear Peter's utterance as anything but ludicrous. The best he can muster? "It's good to be here. I'll make three huts: one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." At least Peter wants equitable sharing. Though nobody really knows, some claim his idea is about reenacting the Jewish festival of tabernacles, Sukkoth. But why in the world he'd try that makes not much more sense than claiming he was playing ring-around-the-rosie in his pajamas. Mainly Peter seems unsure of how to encounter this strange event and so he blurts out randomly just to busy himself with something. Better to do *anything* than have to deal with Jesus.

But with that I need to pause and apologize. Because mostly I've also been trying to blurt out random things to busy myself and keep you preoccupied amid the mystery of this strange Transfiguration story. I've been lining up interesting tidbits, but which may be beside the point. On any given week, I want to stride assuredly to this lectern with a couple sheets of paper of manuscript in decent grammatical shape to sound intelligent or at least a little interesting. But that's not my job as your preacher, and—at the worst—it risks distracting from the main point, those words of God today that are telling us to attend to Jesus.

Indeed, that's highlighted for us in the other reading attributed to Peter. Today's chunk of 2nd Peter portrays him recalling his experience as eyewitness at the Transfiguration. Oddly, though, it doesn't relate eyewitness details, like dazzling white phenomena, a face shining like the sun, or the bright cloud overshadowing them. Rather than eyewitness details, it focuses on being *ear-witnesses* to majesty, of hearing the voice, which confirms Scripture so the Holy

Spirit, in those words, can serve as a beacon amid dark places.

Apparently we don't need explanations of why it's so dark or enumerations of phenomenal, strange details or any "cleverly devised myths." Rather, what we need is again to hear the promise, to recall the words that don't just point us toward the light or toward godliness, but that are God. And so, as it says just before our passage in 2nd Peter today, I intend "to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you" (2Pet1:12).

The main thing for today isn't to explain a spectacular event that happened on a mountaintop or its place in the narrative or a liturgical calendar. It's not to account for mystical wonders or discount them with scientific reasoning. Neither is it to get swept up into the extraordinary so that we imagine faith is only for marvelous glimmering visions. Rather, our call is to attend to Jesus, to listen to him, to hear again God's promise in him.

For that, though I want to stop explaining, I'll do it with one more explanation. The word used in this reading and the name for this day are highly unusual, used no place else, the kind of churchy word I have to teach my spellchecker. Transfiguration is just plain not a word we know. That's the Latin version. The Greek you probably do know, though. The Greek word here is "metamorphosis." You know that one? It's the word we use for a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. It's often been used as a Christian symbol, of resurrection, of Jesus being changed from a plain old human into a beautiful new creation as he emerged from the tomb, a kind of chrysalis or cocoon.

But I want to proclaim to you today that gets the point backward. Jesus isn't a caterpillar waiting to turn into a butterfly. He's a butterfly whose metamorphosis was to become human.

That is the point. That is what this Metamorphosis Sunday is about, not a glimpse of Easter but an assurance of God's presence in the plain old regular daily Jesus who's all too human and faces the hardness of life and suffers death. That's where God wants to be found and where God is for you, not as a special light out of the darkness, but there amid the hard uncertainty, striving with you. That reversal is what we are supposed to pay attention to.

See, thinking of God as awesome shining brightness doesn't strike us as all that remarkable. We expect it. We'd be kidding ourselves if we claimed this reading of a shiny Jesus was very strange, because we associate him with a star and we like the play-on-words of calling him the Sun, and have expected that he had a halo illuminating his head since the night he was born.

But that's not the point, not our truth. One of the most important Bible passages about him uses today's terminology and says that Jesus "morphed" from such heavenly bliss into regular life, not by mountain amazement but descending into the valleys of the shadow of death. That passage declares, "though Christ Jesus was in the form—the morph—of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of [morphing into] a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

That remarkable, stunning passage declares Jesus took on your figure, your form, not grasping for power or glory or whatever it is that our ridiculous elites think they're striving toward, not expecting ecstatic light to be the utmost importance. Instead Jesus morphed to take your humble human form and to be a slave—not a slave to obey a big bossy God, but

a slave to serve you. His metamorphosis wasn't a diamond in the rough, but to join the dirt and grime and muckiness of all that you're going through. That is where God's majesty is found.

You don't need a miraculous escape to find God. God is already here with you, and wants you to know it. Even this worship—as our shiny mountaintop encounter—isn't a distraction or pause from the world, but is to re-attune your awareness that God's presence is with you, here on earth, in your life.

As we are about to shut down singing Alleluias for the season of Lent, and though that practice would seem to move us away from the mountaintop glory, the real majesty of God continues with you. So with our hymn of the day, the ushers are going to hand you a little card with an Alleluia. For Lent, the Alleluia won't be in the beauty of church but in the regularness of your life. I encourage you to take that card and tuck it someplace random and ordinary where you'll come across it—a sock drawer, your wallet, a backpack, the dashboard, a cupboard, by the litterbox, by the computer where you encounter bad news. It's in those places where Jesus abides and wants to be known. That's our Alleluia.