

Any of you who have participated in the Wednesday morning pastors' Bible study, which by the way we welcome any of you to join us, know that we read and discuss the Scripture lessons for the coming Sunday and invariably each week I introduce them by saying something along the lines that "The texts we are going to look at today are fascinating/challenging/ intriguing and so on, and each week I mean it, but this week I really mean it, and I think I am in good company in saying so. All three synoptic Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, include this story with little variation in the way they tell it. The only one who doesn't include it is John, who curiously is the only one who was actually there when it happened. Perhaps he doesn't tell the story because he knows that the other three have already told it and told it well and we know John chooses to write his Gospel in a very different way anyway; or perhaps he doesn't tell it because he can't quite find the words to do so. Have you ever had an experience, particularly a religious experience that was so real, so profound, so meaningful or inspirational that you just haven't been able to put it into words that make sense to anyone else? Perhaps that is what John experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration. In every way this story reads just like any other historical narrative, except for the fact that it hints of a bit of hysteria, something outside the bounds of normal human experience, and we'll get to that.

Matthew tell us it was "*Six days later*", which begs the question, "six days later" than what? If we go back a week in the Gospels to the middle of chapter 16, we find Jesus and His disciples at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus asks this provocative question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" and Peter gives his now famous answer, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*", which Jesus affirms as being the truth.

This is a turning point in the Gospel story. The disciples have been following Jesus for nearly three years at this point, so they have seen and heard a lot, a lot of preaching and teaching and healings and miracles. They surely knew He was a unique individual, unlike anyone else they had ever been with, but none of them had yet come to this conclusion that "*He was the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

Why hadn't they seen it before, because this confession strikes at the heart of the nature of faith. Faith is not something we come to by our senses – by what we see or hear, or by our intellect – by what we think about and deduce, or even by our experiences – what we think we know to be true for ourselves. In fact, faith is not something we do for ourselves at all; it is something God does for us. It is not a result of our finally discovering God or getting all of our questions answered, or putting ourselves in the right place or position to receive Him. No, faith comes when God reveals Himself to us. Faith comes by "revelation" not by "calculation or observation". Think of that experience you had with God that you can't quite put in to words – you didn't invent or contrive that, it was given to you and it likely caught you totally off guard. That was God's doing, not your own. That was God revealing Himself to you, not you finally "finding" God, and that is why Jesus affirms Peter's confession by saying, "*Blessed are you, Simon, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven*", then He told them not to tell anyone about any of that...at least not yet.

So, now that the disciples had at least an inkling of who it was they were dealing with – Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God – He went on to tell them that His time of ministry was drawing to a close and that He was going to Jerusalem where He would be arrested, persecuted and killed before rising again on the third day; none of which they could understand or comprehend, and again Jesus said, "*Don't tell anybody about any of this...at least not yet.*"

So, all of that is the backdrop for our lesson today. "Six days" after all of this, Jesus takes Peter, James and John, the inner circle of the chosen twelve, up a high mountain, and it is a good thing He took all three of them as witnesses because had He only taken one of them no one would have believed them, because what they experienced on the mountain shifted from the historical to the hysterical – as in a supra-human experience that no one would believe if there weren't other witnesses there to confirm it.

Matthew writes that suddenly Jesus was transfigured before them. "Transfigured", changed, from the inside out. His face shone like the sun. His clothes became dazzling white. Peter, James and John witnessed the metamorphosis of Jesus, His literally being changed before their very eyes. Is it any wonder John might have had trouble writing about this experience?

What is remarkable though about the way this story is told is not that Jesus suddenly stood before them, like an actor at center stage with a heavenly spotlight shining down on Him while all the rest of the scene has gone to dark; but rather that He was standing at center stage and the light shone from within Him. He was illuminated, from the inside out, and what was shining out of Him was His true nature, His divinity as the Son of God.

Suddenly then standing with Him were Moses and Elijah. Why these two? Moses was the great lawgiver and Elijah the great prophet who was promised to return before the Messiah would appear. Recall what we call the "Old Testament" was commonly referred to as "The Law and the Prophets", so in this scene Jesus is seen standing as the continuation of the ancient tradition, but is clearly superior to it. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, the One they have been pointing to and waiting for.

As the three are talking, Peter decides he wants to get in on the conversation, so he offers to build three booths, shelters, tabernacles, one for each of them. Peter was no fool. He wants that moment to last as long as possible, as do any of us who have an encounter with the Divine, we just want to linger there...forever. But Peter also wants to delay or avoid what He knew Jesus was going to face when He got down off that mountain... death in Jerusalem.

As he was still speaking a bright cloud overshadows them and God speaks from the cloud. In the entire New Testament God only speaks audibly two times, here and at Jesus' baptism, and curiously He says essentially the same thing both times, "This is My Son, the Beloved, with Him I am well pleased", only here He adds the tag line, "Listen to Him."

Six days earlier Peter had come to the same conclusion and all the disciples agreed, and now they hear it from God Himself, "This is Jesus, the Christ, God's own Son", and appropriately they fall down before Him in worship and fear, only opening their eyes when Jesus touches them, and there He is, standing alone. This story is all about Jesus, the confirmation of who He was, who He is. All along the way of following Him they asked the same question you and I continue to ask today, "Who is He? Who is Jesus, really?" They had seen Him preach and teach and heal and perform miracles. They knew who He was by His human nature, they saw that by observation, but they could only come to understand His divine nature by revelation, and the same is true for you and me today. We can know everything there is to know about the man Jesus, all the facts and figures and stories, but we will only truly know Jesus as Savior and Lord when He reveals Himself to us.

This kind of transfiguration experience can only happen to Jesus, it is the confirmation of who He is in His divinity; but clearly this experience was not intended for Him alone. Peter, James and John were intended to witness it and eventually were intended to tell others about it. But I also think it was demonstrating a larger spiritual truth that what God has done for Jesus, He also intends to do for you and

for me. Just as Jesus was transfigured from the inside out, so we also are to be transformed and changed from the inside out. The whole of the Christian life is one of transformation, of being changed into the likeness of Jesus. Recall Paul's writing in Romans 12, "*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you will discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*"

The world teaches us a sense of what is good and what is bad, or as Paul would say, what is "*good, acceptable and perfect*", so we try to do a bit more of the good and a bit less of the bad, with some measure of success or failure, but most of the changes we try to make in ourselves are from the outside in. We try to change our behaviors or our actions or our attitudes, but real and lasting change always comes from the inside out; it is not a covering, but a change of heart, a change of nature, and this is what Jesus came to do for us, to give us new hearts, transformed minds, changed lives, from the inside out.

When we come to faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord God gives us the gift of His Holy Spirit and that Spirit takes us residence in our hearts and the changes begin from the inside out. Being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is not a matter of doing certain things and not doing certain other things, those are all cosmetic changes. No, being a Christian means having a changed heart, having the Spirit of God living and working within us, and that is not something we can do for ourselves; it is something only God can do for us. .

When I was in seminary I served for a year in a maximum security prison as a chaplain and I vividly remember our supervisor talking about the necessity of this heart change in the men we were working with because all of the social programs and technical training we were offering them would have unintended consequences if there wasn't a fundamental change in them from the inside out. We could teach welding, but without a heart change were just producing a better safe cracker. We could teach auto mechanics but without a heart change we were just giving skills to make a better car thief, and so on. The same is true for us. Without a change of heart all the changes we are trying to make in ourselves are either just window dressing or a set up for disappointment. Real change comes from the inside out.

The experience of transfiguration belongs to Jesus alone, but the work of transformation is intended for each of us. Remember, Jesus says, "*You are the light of the world*". What He is saying is, not only is God's light going to shine on us, but that it is going to shine through us in a darkened world. He also says, "*The righteous shall shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father*" (13:43). Just as Jesus shone like the sun, so shall we!

Let me add one final thought, perhaps the most important thought and certainly our "take away" for today. When God spoke from the cloud, He added this tag to His affirmation/confirmation of who Jesus is, "*Listen to Him!*" The point of all of this: the teachings, the healings, the miracles, the mountain, the shining, the cloud, the voice, the witnesses, all of it, is so that we will know who Jesus really is, the Christ, the Son of the living God, and knowing that we will "listen" to Him.

There is a difference between "hearing" and "listening". Hearing is an auditory function, but listening is a matter of the heart; it is an intention, an action. God commands us to "listen" to His Son, not just nod our heads in agreement with what He says, but actually do what He tells us to do. Listening involves both believing and obeying. And as we do that we begin to shine, we begin the process of being transformed into His image and changed, from the inside out.

**Matthew 17:1-9 ( NRSV )**

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

**Romans 12:1-2 ( NRSV )**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.