

## Hang On to the Light

When Peter, James, and John went hiking up the mountain with Jesus, they couldn't possibly have imagined what they were about to see. Things were probably a little strained between Jesus and Peter that day. It had been about a week since Peter distinguished himself by confessing that Jesus was the Messiah, then blew his insight to bits by scolding Jesus for talking about his impending Passion. Peter was right that Jesus was the Messiah, wrong in whom he expected the Messiah to be. Right or wrong, though, Peter spoke out of love for his rabbi. Being called Satan for that, especially in front of the other disciples, must have stung. Mark doesn't tell us what, if anything, was said between Jesus and his closest friends as they trekked up the mountain. We might imagine Jesus calmly walking in the lead, with James and John following, clowning around and jockeying for top billing in the Messiah's new kingdom, and Peter taking up the rear, nursing his hurt feelings in silence.

It isn't long before Peter's hurt is transformed into terror. When they reach the mountain top, Jesus is suddenly transfigured, his face shining, his clothes radiant white. He chats amiably with Elijah and Moses, the two greatest figures in the Hebrew Scriptures. The disciples see him transformed and are scared to death. When Peter awkwardly attempts to join the conversation, a cloud appears and the booming voice of Adonai speaks from it: "this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Then, poof! The cloud disappears, Moses and Elijah vanish, and Jesus returns to his everyday form. The glorious spectacle can't have taken more than a few minutes, but it should have changed everything Peter, James and John thought they knew about Jesus.

Jesus's Transfiguration is a preacher's dream because it offers so many avenues for reflection. At the same time, the Transfiguration is a preacher's nightmare because it doesn't make any sense in the world as we know it. We aren't any better equipped to understand what

happened on that mountain than the disciples were. As Bible scholar Matt Skinner observes, we simply can't explain the Transfiguration and we should resist the temptation to try. To quote Skinner, "[w]hen has the idea of a brilliantly glowing holy figure ever 'made sense,' anyway? The transfigured Jesus isn't supposed to be figured out. He's supposed to be appreciated."

Much as we appreciate Jesus – we wouldn't be in church this morning if we didn't – we have to admit that we really can't figure him out. Jesus is the Son of our Creator; we're just creatures. Our trying to understand Jesus is a little like a six-year-old child trying to understand Einstein's Theory of Relativity in the original German. Jesus always had reasons for the things he said and did, though, and they often involved teaching his disciples something they couldn't quite grasp on their own. So, while we can't fully comprehend Jesus, I think we *can* try to understand why he chose to let the disciples, and us, see him in all his unearthly glory.

We can start with a careful look at what happened on that mountain. As Bible scholar Melinda Quivik points out, there's a subtle but important distinction between transformation and transfiguration. When we say a thing is transformed, we usually mean "a complete or essential change in [its] composition or structure." Transfiguration refers to a change to outward form or appearance. Quivik argues that "Jesus' transfiguration does not alter who he is but gives to those who see [his] changed visage a new understanding of him because they see him outwardly in a different light ... [Jesus] is not made to have a new essential self but an appearance that conveys his standing in the company of Israel's greatest prophets." In other words, Jesus remains Jesus. The Transfiguration just allows the disciples to see and appreciate him differently.

Another way to think about the Transfiguration is that it didn't change Jesus at all. It simply uncovered the supernatural reality beneath his outward appearance. The disciples were accustomed to thinking of Jesus as entirely human, a man of exceptional wisdom and talent, but

still just a man. The Transfiguration reveals Jesus's divine glory, showing the disciples that the Son of Man, a title Jesus claimed for himself from the Hebrew Book of Daniel is, in fact, the holy Son of God, a true God himself and heir to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Scripture teaches us that ours is not the only reality. There's another divine reality, a fantastical place populated by angels and immortal saints where fiery chariots race down streets of gold, a strangely beautiful world that gleams with the holy light of God. It's the world described in the final book of the Bible, a book that is appropriately titled not "The Last Battle" or even "The Victory of Christ" but, rather, "The Book of Revelation." That world is the Kingdom of Heaven, normally invisible to us, but occasionally revealed in brief, tantalizing glimpses to a fortunate few. Perhaps Jesus allowed his three most trusted disciples to see him as the angels do because they had so thoroughly misunderstood who he was. They thought the Messiah would be a King Arthur figure who would liberate Israel from Rome on an earthly battlefield. Jesus showed them that the Messiah is a godly figure who liberates all of humanity on a celestial battlefield. He revealed to them the entire truth of who he is. And it amazes me how quickly they seemed to forget what they had seen.

The Transfiguration takes place in verses two through nine of chapter nine of Mark's Gospel. By verse thirty-three, the disciples are back to squabbling over which of them is the greatest, picturing themselves as noblemen in the worldly court of their triumphant but mortal Messiah king. In fairness, it's hard to imagine the Kingdom of Heaven, harder still to envision what place each of us might have in it. And Jesus had returned to his mortal guise. Perhaps they decided that they had only imagined his Transfiguration. Perhaps their bad habits, like picturing themselves puffed up with earthly power, were too hard to break. Or perhaps their fears and daily distractions nibbled away at their minds until they forgot what Jesus looked like when he was lit

up like white lightning. People are terrified of the divine world; it's usually easier, and feels safer, to pretend it simply isn't there.

Modern life buries us in garish images that clamor for our attention. Thanks to photoshopping and artificial intelligence, it's hard to tell which images are genuine, and which are cleverly crafted to make us more vulnerable to advertising and political influence. It can be very difficult to hold on to any idea or image that challenges our hyper-capitalist culture or tries to rouse us from our small-minded habits of thought. If we picture Jesus as a wise, compassionate, and sometimes acerbic human teacher, we can admire him without being challenged too much. If we start to picture Jesus as the luminous, holy Son of the Most High God, he can seem alien, even threatening. But he's both, and we need to remember that.

We're about to enter the season of Lent, a time for reflection and repentance. Nights are long and often cold this time of year. Winter darkness can be daunting, and contemplating our mistakes can be depressing, especially if we dwell on them for too long. It's important to look honestly at ourselves during Lent; acknowledging our shortcomings helps us grow into the people God intends us to be. Every one of us has made mistakes, and we all could be better Christians and better people than we are. But it's also important to remember that we fast, pray and repent during Lent not to drown in shame, but so we can correct our course and turn back to our Lord, the radiant Son of God. So, pray, fast, and repent over the coming weeks, but don't let your Lenten practices drive you to despair. Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer, is waiting to forgive you and welcome you into the Kingdom of Heaven, a world that is every bit as real as our own fallen world, and far more beautiful. May the holy light of Christ be your beacon, gently guiding you through the darkness of this Lenten season so you can emerge restored, renewed, and ready for the Easter celebration to come. *Amen.*