

Exodus 34:29-35  
Psalm 99  
2 Peter 1:13-21  
Luke 9:28-36

Feast of the Transfiguration  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
August 6, 2023  
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### Dazzling Light

I often say the church year gives us everything we need. Advent, that time of watching and waiting, anticipation and longing offers us the opportunity to go inward and to attend to the signs of Christ's advent all around us. Epiphany, the season of light, tells of Jesus Christ the light of the world, and reminds us that our work is to be Christ's light in the world. Lent gives us 40 days to examine our lives, to look for all the things we do to keep God at a distance, and to gently move those things away so we can let God come close. Easter offers 50 days to celebrate the great joy of resurrection. And Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit blew into Jerusalem, celebrates the Holy Spirit alive in us. Then comes ordinary time – not the “regular” or “boring” sort of ordinary, but the “ordinal” sort of ordinary. Ordinal means something like counting and has to do with a thing's position in sequence<sup>1</sup>. In The Circle of the Church Year, one of the stories we tell the children in Godly Play, we describe ordinary time as the great, green, growing season, the time when we hear the stories of Jesus' life and grow into our own lives in Christ.

Why the liturgical year lesson, you ask? Well, it's because we're celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration today, and that doesn't make any sense in the circle of the church year. The transfiguration happened before Jesus turned his eyes toward Jerusalem where he was crucified, not after his resurrection and ascension. Usually, we hear this story on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday as we move into the penitential season of Lent. But those who keep the feasts and fasts of the church know very well one doesn't feast when it's time to fast! And so in the fifteenth century, the Pope declared August 6th as the “official” Feast of the Transfiguration, thereby making feasting and celebrating this glorious event possible. And when August 6<sup>th</sup> falls on a Sunday, we celebrate the Transfiguration!

There. Now you don't need to run down a rabbit hole wondering why on earth we're hearing this story today... and now you have a little window into my nerdy preacher's mind and its vast store of fun facts to know and tell!

Given that we're all out of whack timewise, let's get ourselves situated. Eight days before their hike up the mountain, Jesus had asked the disciples who the people thought he was. People had been saying all sorts of things – John the Baptist, Elijah, maybe a random prophet. And when Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was, Peter proclaimed him as the Messiah. But rather than praise Peter's insight, Jesus responded by telling the disciples he would suffer, be

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<sup>1</sup> <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

killed, and three days later be raised from the dead. Suffice to say, that wasn't the response they were expecting after finally figuring out who Jesus was, and I imagine it left them feeling isolated, confused and more than a little afraid. I'm guessing they were grateful to have Jesus to themselves, and to be heading up the mountain to pray. Finding a quiet place to sit with Jesus and pray is one of the few things that calms me when I'm feeling isolated, confused, or afraid. However, when I sit down with Jesus to pray, he doesn't usually light up, and mostly we don't have visitors...

The Transfiguration story confounds me. I love the story because in it we see a glimpse of the very human Jesus fully divine in all God's glory, and because I can see myself in the story. Like the disciples, I can become exhausted in the face of terrible news. Like the disciples, I want to stay in the presence of God once I've gotten myself there. Like the disciples, I am sometimes afraid of the dark clouds that seem to cover over my life, or the lives of the ones I love. And like the disciples, I sometimes just don't understand what God is up to.

Jesus had been ministering, teaching, traveling, and living with the disciples for a long time. He had preached a whole new world, a world where all were beloved and blessed, where everyone had enough and no one had so much that it ruined them, where justice and peace and mercy and love were the law. When Jesus first called his disciples, they were unremarkable people - a tax collector, a builder, a thief, some fishermen. But after all this time with Jesus, their lives had been radically changed, infused with a kind of hope and belief in a way of life that none of them ever before could have conceived of. A better life where all were cared for, and the sick, poor, blind, possessed, and lame people were healed and fed and transformed.

The disciples had been swept up in God's story and God's story had become their story. Everything centered around Jesus, the one Peter proclaimed as the Messiah. So when Jesus told them he was about to undergo great suffering and be crucified, their world began to crumble. Yes, he did tell them he would be raised on the third day, but I can't help thinking all they heard was that he was going to die. And that's what was in their minds and hearts when they went with Jesus up the mountain that day. Everything they had worked for and hoped for and lived for was coming crashing down around them. We know there is resurrection at the end of the story, but the disciples hadn't experienced that. Their world was falling apart, and so they prayed. It was a good idea.

They prayed and they prayed and they prayed, and when they had prayed so long and so hard that they were weary to the bone, something terrifying and wonderful happened... they saw Jesus glowing with a light so bright that they wanted to cover their eyes. But they couldn't help themselves, they had to look. It was stunning, that light so bright they couldn't see the difference between human and divine. It must have been terrifying too. Nobody knew what to think or to do, so Peter, being Peter, offered to build three dwellings so they could stay forever. Perhaps he thought things might be different, that all the talk of death and suffering and the end of everything they had hoped for would disappear if only they could stay there, basking in that glorious light. But it wasn't to be. Suddenly they were covered in clouds and terrified by God's thundering voice saying *This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him.*

Those are very similar to the words Jesus heard at his baptism, at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. *You are my Son, my beloved.* There is a difference there – can you hear it? God is speaking to Jesus at his baptism, saying “You” are my Son. But here, at this very different sort of beginning, the beginning of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the cross, we hear the words God spoke to everyone. *This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him.* In the face of Jesus’ certain death, that was all the counsel they got. As it turns out, it was all the counsel they needed. It’s all the counsel we need too. *Listen to him.* When the disciples went up the mountain to pray, they were listening for God. That’s a lot of what prayer is, you know, listening for God. Praying draws us deeper and deeper into God’s heart, turning us more and more into the dazzling beauties God created us to be. Praying, listening for God, transforms us... you could even say it transfigures us.

Why do you pray? I’m not asking about our common prayer at worship, I’m asking about your own personal prayer. Why do you pray? After all, God doesn’t need us to say what’s on our minds and hearts, God already knows, right? We said so this morning ... *Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid...* But still we pray, and when we pray, something wonderful happens to us, no matter how well or unwell we think we’ve done it. Praying draws us closer to God, closer to the ones we pray with and for. I think we’re changed and formed and re-formed by our prayer. I think we’re transfigured ourselves.

I can’t imagine what Jesus and his friends felt like walking down the mountain. We’re told they were silent. They hadn’t wanted to come back down the mountain, back to the world of an occupying army, disputes among religious leaders, and a Messiah who was about to die. Yes, the mountaintop moment had happened, but in the blink of an eye, it was over. Life can be like that, I know. There are moments we want to hold on to forever, and we can’t. People die. Relationships end. We lose our job, our health, our independence or maybe just our self-confidence. That’s part of what it is to be human. Dying and rising, dying and rising, dying and rising. And still, it’s natural to want to cling to the glorious times, the gentle times, the easy times, the times when God feels close.

That’s what was going on, on that mountaintop. Even in the midst of their world crashing down all around them they prayed and they prayed and they prayed, and in the midst of all that praying God came so close that the disciples saw Jesus for who he truly was. We’re inclined to think that the dazzling bright Jesus was the only one who was transfigured, because he was the only one who lit up. But I think his friends were transfigured too. Having steeped themselves in life with Jesus, having prayed until they could pray no longer, having been faithful when it seemed their world was shattering, they too were transfigured, changed into people who were finally able to experience the true nature of Jesus Christ, the Living God.

It’s a different way to look at the transfiguration, I know. But I think what Jesus is showing us is that when we remain faithful in the midst of chaos and fear, when we give ourselves over, consenting to being consumed by our life in God, when we allow God to come so very close, all we will see is dazzling light. Amen