

## Good to be Here

Matthew 17:1-9

The account of Jesus' transfiguration (*metamorphōsis*) seems strange to the mind of us who have been conditioned by Western thinking about proven facts that can be replicated—and we are taught to be suspect any account of reality that ventures out into the netherworld! With the exception of those whose spirituality permits and even demands that we believe everything the Bible says without question, none of us escapes the insistence of our science-bound culture that sacred texts should conform to "normal," demonstrable truth. Whether we admit it or not, even those of us who think ourselves especially open to mystery feel uneasy in the presence of texts like this one today.

However, at one level of perception, the experience of transfiguration is not *entirely* beyond the understanding of most of us sensitive people. Most of us have known moments of surprised enlightenment when someone we thought we knew fairly well is suddenly revealed in a completely new light? We are especially moved to consider the life of someone no longer living—a parent or grandparent, a friend or mentor—and realize how we have not grasped the real character of that loved one, or how we have missed the deep meaning of that person's life. As we look back we remember conversations, encounters, and events that puzzled us at the time, but which now, we perceive with eyes of faith. The ordinary, in remembrance, takes on extraordinary significance. After significant lapses of time for contemplation, we remember and understand the person's wisdom, their compassion, their grace.

With our text, as at many other points in the scriptural testimony to the life of Jesus, we are being asked to confront the *great* question that the New Testament puts to us—the question that Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously stated: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"—the question that Jesus himself put to his disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

The transfiguration does not intend to transport the faithful into a realm where the Jesus known to fishermen, tax collectors, and prostitutes suddenly appears in ghostly appearance, lit up from the inside, and talking with famous biblical figures that died centuries before Jesus walked the earth in human form! No, the experience tries to explain how these untutored, down-to-earth men and women who left everything and followed him, hardly knowing why—that these same persons, later, knew that they had been drawn to him because, for all his obvious humanity, something radiated from him that spoke of deep and eternal truth. Matthew and Jesus' other followers remembered an incident when Jesus' radiance seemed to manifest itself almost ... visibly.

This affirms the early church's foundational belief about Jesus: that he was not just another exceptional human being, prophet, or great teacher and example for all, but Jesus is the crucial representation of the Divine, the source and judge of life. As one of the three disciples who was with Jesus on that occasion had stated bluntly: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Six days later, Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus up the mountain after hearing the news that Jesus is going to Jerusalem and there he would be put to death. They begin to look for alternatives, desperate for a second opinion, a way to stop time. They want to build a safe sanctuary away from the world, to be content in the moment, saving Jesus and themselves from the heartache to come. It was the same three disciples who

felt they had been specially elected to witness Christ's *metamorphōsis*, and so proposed that shelters or booths be erected to commemorate the occasion, who had to be reminded that it was *Jesus' way* and not theirs to which they must be conformed: "listen to *him*" (17:5)—namely, to the one who has already assured them that true discipleship means taking up the cross, not building churches (16:24-26). **Douglas John Hall**

We also glimpse transfiguration moments in our lives today. We glimpse that moment in a hospital room as we sit with two people who have just heard the worst news of their lives and watch the patient reach out to assure the companion, the healthy one, that all will be well. We glimpse that moment when the evening news reflects nothing but chaos, and then there is one story of a person's graceful act of healing a broken world by caring for another person the world would rather forget. These are the moments when we begin to understand that where there is suffering, there is Holy Ground. These are the moments when we realize God is present in suffering and sacrifice, just as God is present in the promise and potential of our lives.

This moment of transfiguration is just such a moment. On one hand, the transfiguration affirms Jesus' divinity; on the other, it begins to give the disciples eyes to see God's light in the chaos to come: death, loss, fear and resurrection. The challenge to the disciples was and for us is to live in a world without Jesus' bodily presence. The transfiguration anticipated this challenge, inviting us to live in "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). As that light shines in our hearts, the incarnate God is made real in the every day.

God prepares people in the transcendent encounters of our lives to endure the world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is never beyond God's redemption. These encounters happen on mountaintops

with a blinding light for some. For most, they happen in the ordinary moments of our homes, classrooms, boardrooms, and soup kitchens—any place where we make a space for the Holy to be present.

The transfiguration also offered the disciples the knowledge that while there was nothing they can do to save themselves from suffering, there was also no way they could shield themselves from the light of God that sheds hope in their darkest moments. The mountain was the way for God to prepare a human band of companions for the sacred journey, to offer something to hold onto when they descend into the crushing reality of the world below.

The moment of transfiguration is that point at which God says to the world and to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or sorrow. We cannot build God a monument, and we cannot keep God safe. We also cannot escape the light that God will shed on our path. We cannot escape God, Immanuel among us. God will find us in our homes and in our workplaces. God will find us when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy. God will find us when we run away from God and when we are sitting in the middle of what seems like hell.

### **Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz**

This is the way that God comes into the world: not simply the brilliant cloud of mystery, not only a voice thundering from heaven, but also a human hand laid upon a shoulder and the words, "Do not be afraid." God comes to us quietly, gently, that we may draw near and not be afraid. God's glory is majestic and so far beyond our capacity to receive it that we can take just as much of God's glory as a human can glimpse.

We say that God's glory and magnificence and power and majesty are unsurpassable, we say; but we must also declare that God's glory and

magnificence and power and majesty are surpassed by God's willingness to shed them all in order that we might finally recognize God's love and gentleness. The measureless power that made the heavens and the earth concentrates in a hand reaching out to us. **Patrick J. Willson**

While the church today, as always, is challenged to confess in word and deed that Jesus is indeed "the Christ," at the same time the church is warned against using that confession in the service of being self-satisfied with our religion. "The Christ of faith," always leads to him who "was crucified, dead, and buried," but who now sits at the right hand of God. Until we are able, in whatever language, imagery, and act, to engage in such a "leap of faith," we will lack the confidence to take up our real mission in the world.

**Douglas John Hall**

Jesus, in his glory, touches us, comforts us, reassures us, tells us not to be afraid. Each Sunday we worship and commune. We experience a glimpse of the presence of God, and it is good to be here. We experience a glimpse of the glory of God, and it is good to be here. We experience a glimpse of the redemption of God, and it is good to be here. We experience a glimpse of the grace of God, and it is good to be here. Yes, it is good for us to be here! So "get up and do not be afraid" (v. 7).