

To be transfigured...

Okay, being a complete Church nerd, there's something I need to clarify before we get started with today's sermon.

For many denominations, the observance of the Transfiguration takes place on the 6th of August. When I was a student, working with the Parish of the Bruce in Ontario, I had the delight of working with Pastor Brad Mittleholtz with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. One Saturday we were comparing notes about the first Sunday in August and I said I was observing Transfiguration. He looked quite startled and said the ELCIC observes Transfiguration just before the beginning of Lent. I shrugged my shoulders and didn't think too much about it. Until I got back to Seminary and was chastised for even considering changing the observance of the Transfiguration. Which of course, made me want to change the observance of it even more.

So I did some research.

“In the East, the Festival of the Transfiguration has been celebrated since the late fourth century, and is one of the twelve great festivals of the East Orthodox calendar. In the West it was observed after the ninth century by some monastic orders, and in 1457 Pope Callistus III ordered its general observance. At the time of the Reformation, it was still felt in some countries to be a "recent innovation," and so was not immediately taken over into most Reformation calendars, but is now found on most calendars that have been revised in the twentieth century. A recent tendency in the West is to commemorate the Transfiguration on the Sunday just before Lent, in accordance with the pattern found in the Synoptics, where Jesus is represented as beginning to speak of his forthcoming death just about the time of the Transfiguration, so that it forms a fitting transition between the Epiphany season, in which Christ makes himself known, and the Lenten season, in which he prepares the disciples for what lies ahead. Whether observing the Transfiguration then will affect the observation of it on 6 August remains to be seen.”

(www.justus.anglican.org)

So there you have it. The date of the 6th of August was initially chosen to commemorate victory in war. “It was gradually introduced into the Western Church, and its observance was fixed as August 6 by Pope Calixtus III in 1457 as a thank offering for the victory over the Turks at Belgrade on that day in 1456.”

(www.britannica.com)

Now, forgive my ignorance, but I'm not that stoked to think that a major festival in the Church is based on a war victory in 1456. It makes much more sense to me that the Feast of the Transfiguration be observed just prior to Lent because it is about Jesus preparing his disciples for the impending end of his earthly life.

So in case you were wondering, or, um, even if you weren't, now you know why this is when we observe the Transfiguration.

The word transfiguration means "a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state." (www.dictionary.com) In other words, to be transfigured means to change in appearance. In Mark's gospel, "And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." (Mark 9.2.b-3, NRSV)

It's a pretty big deal to be transfigured. It's not something that happens every day, that is certain. And when we look at the reading for today, one thing stands out to me. Peter. God bless him. Peter is like a puppy in a grown man's body. He's enthusiastic, awkward, gets things wrong as often as he gets things right, yet it doesn't deter him from his enthusiasm. He doesn't seem to mind what others think of him. And I imagine Jesus had more than one "facepalm" moment with him.

Jesus has invited Peter, James and John to come to the mountain with him. They went to what is believed to be Mount Tabor in Lower Galilee. They ascended the mountain and before their very eyes Jesus' appearance changed to a dazzling white garment.

Then Moses and Elijah showed up, and the three of them were chatting, as Peter was standing with James and John; the three of them were in a kind of stunned silence. Let's take a quick look at the landing slide again. There's Jesus in the dazzling white robe, with Moses and Elijah. To the side we see three figures looking in awe at the scene before them. Now, I don't know this for certain, but I'm assuming the tallest figure in the painting is Peter.

Scholar's believe that Peter, James and John were present at the Transfiguration in order to assure them that Jesus was the Messiah. That makes sense, it's good to have witnesses to these awe-inspiring moments.

Peter, being Peter, is having the very best day of his life. He doesn't want it to end. So he says to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He {Peter} did not know what to say, for they were terrified." (Mark 9.5-6, NRSV)

Bless him. He's terrified, but doesn't want to leave. And yet, they have to. They can't stay there. God's voice is heard, "Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." (Mark 9.7-8, NRSV)

So then they head down the mountain with a strong warning from Jesus, "to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead." (Mark 9.9 NRSV) Now, we who live more than 2,000 years after this warning understand what Jesus is saying. It is quite likely that Peter, James and John would not. We have heard this story before; they are experiencing it first hand and hearing these words for the first time.

When Jesus was baptised, 8 chapters back in Mark's gospel, we are not told if there were witnesses present. As you'll remember, God's voice proclaimed, "this is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Those words are mirrored here today, yet with more urgency...LISTEN TO HIM. And yet, we do not know if Peter, Mark and James were at Jesus baptism to hear God's voice the first time.

Regardless, they definitely were present at the Transfiguration, to witness Jesus' appearance change. His face sparkled, and his clothes became dazzling white. Jesus has been transfigured, and so had Peter, James and John. Not to the same extent; yet they had witnessed something absolutely transformative.

The last person to experience something like this was when Moses received the Ten Commandments. He is described as "the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him." (Exodus 34.30, NRSV) He, too, had been transfigured in the sight of God.

Have any of you been transfigured? Now, I'm no mountain climber, nor have I ever been to Lower Galilee, but I have had experiences that were so profound, they left me feeling quite different then when I was before. The first was my Confirmation at age 30-something, on a sweltering June afternoon at Trinity Anglican Church in Galt, Ontario.

Bishop Bruce Howe laid his hands on my head and said “Strengthen, O Lord, your servant Andrea with your Holy Spirit; empower her for your service; and sustain her all the days of her life. Amen.” (BAS p. 628) The second time was when I was ordained, to the Diaconate and again as a Priest, when I heard “Send down your Holy Spirit upon your servant Andrea, whom we consecrate in your name to the office and work of a priest in the Church.” (BAS p. 648) I count these two instances as one as they happened only three months apart.

The third time was when we entered together in our Covenant of Shared Ministry. The prayers, the songs, the promises we made to each other before God, left me feeling as though together, we could take on the world. And look, we’re surviving COVID together! We have become a community that two years ago would have looked impossible. Yet we are learning through this time together, that we don’t necessarily need a mountaintop experience to appreciate the breadth and depth of God’s infinite love and mercy.

Ask yourself, when was your Transfiguring moment? They need not happen on the top of a mountain, yet when they do happen, we need to remember that as much as we might want to, we cannot stay on that mountain. Our transfiguration may not occur as sparkling faces and gleaming white clothing, ours may be more an internal than external change.

For those of us who struggle with mental illness, when we are stuck in the depth of depression and darkness, it can feel as though it will always be dark. And yet, whether we are prepared for it or not, the sun will rise the next day. Whether we see it or not. It will happen.

Perhaps those transfiguring moments are when we wake up and the day feels better than the day before, especially if yesterday was a bleak and dark day. We need not be surrounded by witnesses in order to hear the voice of God and to understand that we all are God’s beloved. That we are cherished and loved in God’s eyes. That on the day of our birth, God whispered in our ear “you are My Beloved, in you I am well pleased.”

Perhaps those who have given birth or held a newborn in our arms will see the moment that tiny hand grasps our finger as a transfiguring moment. Before the birth was the preparation, and now the baby is safely here, our lives will be irrevocably changed. We have gazed into the face of God. And it is absolute perfection. And we will never again be the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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Mark 9.2-9