

Metamorphosed

As is often the case, it helps to understand this story within the context of the bigger story. So, let me quickly bring you up to speed and remind you what's going on at this point in the Gospel of Matthew.

So far in the story the baby Jesus was conceived under some rather unbelievable circumstances, born in a less-than-ideal location, was a refugee, along with his parents, before he even went to Kindergarten, returned to his homeland guided by angelic instructions, had his ministry announced by his eccentric cousin John who baptized him, accompanied by a talking dove who spoke on behalf of God.

Then he headed out, into the wilderness for 40 days for the specific task of being tempted by the devil. From that point he gathered his disciples – sweet and well-meaning fellows, but kind of simpletons who mostly didn't really “get” what Jesus was trying to do or teach them. He taught, he ministered, he told stories and broke local religious laws to make his points. He loved. He loved his family and his friends. He loved his followers, he loved the crowds and he loved the people who were afraid of him and because of their fear, they become very angry with him. He taught people how to pray and how to fast and how to give. He turned their world upside-down and showed them what God is like. He healed their diseases, he calmed their storms and cast out their demons. He told them not be afraid. And he told them to fight, but not with violence. He fed the thousands, he walked on water and he went ‘round and ‘round with the Pharisees, the scribes and the Sadducees – the teachers and keepers of the law.

Now, I don't want to be too hard on these folks; they often get a bad rap in the story. But they were a little complicated. It's true that they did give Jesus a hard time because many of them were fearful of Jesus and angry with him. Part of the story is that they were the “gate-keepers”, the ones who guarded the traditions and the laws, the status-quo, the order of the day. And the other part of the story was that it was in their best interest to do that – they were at the top of the power totem pole and they were comfortable there. All of Jesus' talk about God's care for the “least of these”, God's covenant hinging on pure hearts and true worship... that wasn't going over so well with these folks who felt like it was their job to protect the rigid laws and rules and make sure the people abided by them.

So, now we're already to chapter 16 of Matthew's story. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees came to test Jesus, to ask him for a sign from heaven. This made Jesus a little testy because by the 16th chapter these guys are still trying to trick him and entrap him.

Now his poor disciples, by the 16th chapter, were also not quite getting it and Jesus was feeling the urgency of needing his disciples to understand who he was and what he was up to. So, he asked them, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (referring to himself, of course) And the disciples reported to him, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

And Simon, son of Jonah, the fisherman, gave his bold and correct reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus was pleased – Simon “gets it”...for a second. So, Jesus praised and affirmed his student, telling him that he would be The Rock, Petros, Peter – and on this Rock Jesus would build his new community. Whew! Jesus thinks maybe it will be ok... maybe these simple, fisher-folk disciples are beginning to catch on. But in the next breath, his hopes are dashed when his “rock”, Simon Peter, gives him argument and flack about his plan to keep marching into Jerusalem, into suffering and death and resurrection. And Jesus was so un-nerved by Peter’s push-back that he said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me...” Poor Peter! From verse 18 to 23 he goes from being “The Rock” to “Satan”! And then Jesus reminded all of them, again, of the cost of discipleship. “...deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you’ll lose it and if you lose your life for my sake, you’ll find it.”

Being a follower of Jesus is not just about having “right beliefs”; it’s also about living a boldly humble life of mercy and love. It’s about naming what’s evil in the world and then genuinely praying and acting for its transformation. Being a follower of Jesus means being willing to march straight into the mouth of the lion, knowing that you may be killed, but being unwilling to kill. Being a follower of Jesus is often counter-intuitive. It’s hard. It’s radical.

And then comes the story of the transfiguration. The word “transfiguration” comes from the Greek “metamorphosis”. This is the story of God sending a powerful sign from heaven. But it wasn’t the one that the Pharisees or the Sadducees had been looking for, it was a sign for the disciples – for us.

First, it was a mountaintop sign. In the Bible, things that happen on mountaintops are significant because mountaintops are where people get closest to God. So it was a sign, a reminder that although God is in the heavens and beyond us, God is also on the mountaintop, right with us. By definition a “mountaintop experience” is something that doesn’t happen every day – it might only happen once or a very few times in our lifetime, but it’s a time when we realize and we’re dazzled by, the presence of God with us. Here’s what one writer says about transfiguration. “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 God will shed on our path. We cannot escape God, Immanuel among us.” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, page 456) Thanks be to God! What a life-changing realization!

The Transfiguration was a sign to help the disciples remember who Jesus is. That “no matter what lies ahead, no matter what the disciples are about to witness and experience, this glimpse (of Jesus shining brightly) is something so powerful that they (and we) can hold onto it and to the truth it” gives about his identity. (Kathryn Matthews, www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_february_26_2017) And just like Peter, James and John, we are disciples who need a strong reminder every day, of who Jesus is. We probably don’t have what we might think of as a “mountain top experience” every Sunday when we come to church, but those early disciples needed one another and I believe that WE need one another! When we gather for worship, we remind each other of who Jesus is, that HE is the One that we

follow. He is the shining image of our Creator God. He is the one who shows us how to live! And I don't know about you, but I need that reminder every day.

The Transfiguration was a sign of hope and trust. Our hope and trust lies in the fact that Jesus himself in all his transfigured, shining glory is not going to stay up on that mountaintop, but he's going to come down the mountain with us, he will lead the way into Jerusalem, into the midst of the angry crowds and the hurting, needy people. And any pain and suffering that we will endure – he endured it too and will be with us through it, leading us, reflecting God's light and glory for us. As we leave this place and head down the mountain into our everyday lives, we can take this hope and trust in Jesus with us.

So, the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus gives us at least three important signs to watch for. First, it's a sign that God is both "out there", beyond us, but also, right here, present with us. Second, it's a sign that helps us to remember who Jesus is – He is The Beloved, the Example, the One whom we follow, who shows us what God is like. Third, it's a sign of hope and trust. Whatever we encounter in this life, Jesus, our Human and Divine Savior has already encountered it and will be our companion, our hope, through it.

Do you remember C.S. Lewis' series of stories about Narnia? In *The Silver Chair*, we read a final word from Aslan: "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down in to Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why is it so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters." Amen. (C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, pages 25-26)