

Transfiguration Sunday – February 22, 2009
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ
Mark 9:2-9

We're going to start out today with a little pop quiz... And we even have a prize for the winner!

Is there anyone here who can use the word "transfigure" in a sentence without quoting the Bible or making reference to Jesus?

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Can anyone here remember ever hearing this word – "transfigure" – used in conversation? I know I certainly can't.

Here's the Greek word our Gospel writer uses: metemorphote. I'll bet that word sounds familiar to some of you – it's a form of a Greek word that we borrowed into English: metamorphosis.

My dictionary defines metamorphosis as "a change of physical form, structure, or substance, especially by supernatural means."¹ The dictionary definition of "transfigure" is much less interesting – it simply says, "to change the form or appearance."² Despite the fact that the dictionary doesn't seem to think much of this word, our Gospel writers sure do. It is truly unique. This word that we translate as "transfigure" is only used twice in all of the Gospels: in today's reading, and in the parallel story in Matthew's Gospel.

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But before we get into today's reading, let's take a look back at where we've been so far in Epiphany.

Our lectionary texts throughout Epiphany have taken us on a journey of discovery about this man Jesus. It's as if a veil has been ever so slowly lifted, revealing more and more about him.

The first Sunday in Epiphany we read about the baptism of Jesus. We read:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."³

This was our introduction to Jesus. Prior to this text we'd only heard about John the Baptist. Jesus, according to Mark, began his earthly ministry by being baptized by John.

And then this wonderful thing happened – the heavens parted and the Spirit descended on Jesus. Who were the witnesses of this miraculous event? Only Jesus. The text says, “**He** saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” And Jesus was the *only* one to hear the voice of God. God addressed Jesus directly: “**You** are my Son, the Beloved; with **you** I am well pleased.” And so, once again, only us, the readers, know who Jesus truly is. No one else at the river that day witnessed this miraculous event.

From that first Sunday in Epiphany we’ve taken a slow walk through the early ministry of Jesus. His first preaching: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”⁴ We heard about Jesus calling the first disciples. We read about his teaching, with authority, in the synagogue in Capernaum. We learned about him casting out an unclean spirit. We’ve read a number of his healing miracles. It’s as if the writer of our Gospel has been ever so slowly peeling back the curtain to reveal to the world who Jesus is.

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As so we encounter today's text. Jesus takes only his inner circle of disciples – Peter, James and John – up to a high mountain. And without preparing us for what is to come, Mark simply springs the news on us: Jesus is transfigured before them. This is a sudden surprise to us as readers, so imagine how the disciples must have felt! No one before had ever seen such a thing, and no one has seen it since. One moment Jesus is standing among them as a normal human being, and the very next he shines with all the brightness of the glory of God. Then appears Moses and Elijah, a great cloud comes over the mountain, and God speaks.

Once again our Gospel writer is drawing parallels with our Old Testament writings. Jesus goes up to a mountain where God speaks; both Moses and Elijah spoke with God on mountains. When Moses spoke with God on Sinai, God spoke from within a great cloud, because no one can gaze upon the glory of God and live.⁵ And yet, the glory of God was so great, that even without seeing God Moses' face would shine with the glory, so much so that he had to veil his face when he returned to the camp, for the glory was too brilliant for others to bear.

But now, in all his transfigured glory, humanity could gaze upon God and live. There should be no doubt remaining for Peter, James and John that Jesus truly is the Son of God. *We've* known all along who Jesus is – Mark started his Gospel by telling us: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”⁶ But just in case there's any doubt remaining, God speaks to all those assembled. And unlike God's voice at Jesus' baptism, this time it's for all to hear: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

And yet, the disciples still don't seem to grasp the fullness of who Jesus is. Just before they went up the mountain Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter answered, “You are the messiah.”⁷ But we know the rest of the story – how Jesus is betrayed by one of his own, and denied by Peter who had declared him “messiah.” The first person to grasp the fullness of Jesus' identity was that Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross who declared, “Truly this man was God's son!”⁸ Jesus, not just the Messiah, but the Son of God.

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It seems somehow fitting that we reserve this word – transfigure – for the miraculous glory of God in Jesus. It was truly a unique event, an event which has never before occurred in history, and will never occur again.

But the glory of the transfiguration was not the end of the story. The way of Jesus was not the way of glory in this life. He came down from that mountain to dwell among us. He came down from that mountain, knowing that his destiny was on the cross. Jesus' glory was in his suffering and death on that cross. His glory doesn't remove suffering or take away pain. His glory enables us to walk the way of the cross with hope and confidence, knowing that he really is God with us, despite the pain.

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It's interesting that the Greek word for transfigure appears two other times in the New Testament, both in the writings of Paul, but our translators don't say "transfigure." The first is in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* [that's the word] by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." The second is in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being *transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." Paul calls upon each of us to be transfigured into the likeness of Jesus. There is no doubt – Jesus has the power the change lives.

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Whenever I go to the altar rail to receive communion and have the opportunity to pause in prayer, my prayer is always that God would use this great gift of the body and blood of Jesus to transform me. I pray that God would increasingly mold me into the image of Christ. I know there are times I fall short, but by and through the grace of God I am forgiven to begin anew each day.

Beginning on Ash Wednesday we will join with Jesus on his journey to the cross. Lent is a time for self-examination and re-committing ourselves to walking the way of Christ.

As we prepare for Lent, I would like to leave you with a quote from Martin Luther. I have this saying written in calligraphy and hung in my home where I see it several times a day. I often stop to ponder it. It seems a fitting thought to leave you with today, as we meditate upon the glory of the transfigured Jesus, and how he may transfigure our lives.

This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness;

Not health but healing,

Not being but becoming,

Not rest but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be

But we are growing toward it,

The process is not yet finished but it is going on,

This is not the end but it is the road.

All does not yet gleam in glory

But all is being purified.

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Amen.

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¹ Frederick C. Mish (Editor-in-Chief), *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1997), p. 464

² *Ibid.*, p. 768

³ Mark 1:9-11

⁴ Mark 1:15

⁵ Exodus 33:17-23

⁶ Mark 1:1

⁷ Mark 8:29

⁸ Mark 15:39