

## TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

February 14, 2010

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

Exodus 34:29—35    Psalm 99    2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2    **Luke 9:28—36**

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This last Sunday in Epiphany each year we read the story of Jesus taking Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray. One year we read from Matthew, another from Mark, and this year from Luke. The basic shape of the story, in each of the gospels, remains the same. Jesus takes these three disciples away for a private time of retreat and prayer.

Just before going up the mountain Jesus revealed to his disciples that he would be going to Jerusalem, and there be persecuted and die. It is while they are on the mountain that this tremendous epiphany occurs. Jesus is alone, praying, when suddenly Moses and Elijah appear. We're told Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah about this future suffering.

There are a few important features of this story that we need to attend to. It's so easy to get caught up in the miraculous that we miss the details.

First, we're told that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up the mountain. According to the culture of Jesus times, *three witnesses* were required in order to provide a valid witness to events. It's no coincidence that Jesus took his top three disciples with him up the mountain – there needed to be three reliable

witnesses to the events that would take place.

Second, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up the mountain *on the eighth day*. This is a signpost to us. The gospel writer is trying to tell us something. This particular day is a turning point. For in seven days God created the world; on the figurative eighth day God will re-create. We Christians gather for worship not on the traditional sabbath; we gather together on the eighth day, the day of the week on which Jesus rose from the dead. Luke is telling us that the events that are about to take place in Jerusalem will cause that eighth day of creation to come about. It is in and through Jesus – crucified, died, and raised from the dead – that all of creation will be re-made. It is in and through Jesus the Christ that all of us will be re-made as new creations.

Third, this appearing of Moses and Elijah is intended to signal to us that Jesus literally stands with the prophets of old. He is very much in keeping with the great Old Testament tradition of the prophet, who comes to declare God's intention to God's people.

But God is going to use this moment to instruct Peter, James and John. Jesus is more than a prophet. A cloud descends, and the voice of God declares, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Jesus is not *just* a prophet; Jesus is the Son of God, the one Chosen to accomplish our eighth-day re-creation.

And yet, despite God having provided the circumstances for there to be a valid and reliable witness to these events, we're told that the disciples remained "silent in those days and told no one any of the things they had seen." Why is that? If any one of us had witnessed such a miraculous event surely we'd be so overwhelmed that we'd go out and tell anyone who would listen! In the account of the transfiguration according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus quite explicitly tells the disciples to tell no one until after the resurrection. There is no such prohibition in Luke. So why didn't the disciples say anything?

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Like so many of the stories and parables in the gospels, this story of the transfiguration is a very hard one to understand. If we're honest with ourselves, none of us preachers could say that we completely understand it. The Apostle Paul was right, when a few weeks ago in First Corinthians we read, "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

Sometimes it's helpful, then, to make use of modern-day parables, to help us better understand these difficult stories of the Bible. One such story might be the movie "Pleasantville." This 1998 movie starred Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon. Anyone see it?

The main characters of this movie are David and Jennifer, two young people

who are struggling to find out just who they are in the world, and what they're supposed to be doing in their lives. David's favorite escape from reality is a 1950's-era black-and-white television show called "Pleasantville," where everything is, well... pleasant. Life is highly controlled, and therefore, highly predictable. One day the television breaks. Immediately a television repair man shows up at David's house and gives him a magical remote control, which transports David and Jennifer directly into the 1950's black-and-white world of "Pleasantville." Everything about them has been transformed into black-and-white – face, hair, and clothing – as they become Bud and Mary-Sue, characters in the black-and-white world of Pleasantville.

As much as David enjoyed watching "Pleasantville" on TV, he doesn't want to stay there. Neither does Jennifer. Each of them handles differently their situation as they seek a way out: Bud tries to fit in, maintaining the black-and-white status quo, while Mary-Sue continues to march to the beat of her own drummer.

It is Mary-Sue's uniqueness that gradually begins to transform her and all of Pleasantville. As she and the other residents begin to discover the passion within them which has been repressed in order to maintain the black-and-white status quo, each one of them is gradually transformed into living color.

These transformations are not always welcomed by the other residents of

Pleasantville. Perhaps this has a lot to say to us about the ways in which we respond to Christ's offer of "Life in all its fullness" and are transformed into richer individuals and churches and societies by a risky and sometimes frightening process of transformation. The changes in us are not always welcomed by others, just as those who were transformed and healed by Christ were persecuted. The scene in the movie where the Dad comes home and finds his wife not there and no dinner anywhere is an achingly accurate picture of the bewilderment of those who demand that Christ tells the crowds *not* to cheer him as he enters Jerusalem. Stay silent; don't change. Those who don't welcome this growth seek out the security of old bastions, their own little black-and-white Pleasantvilles in which life is highly regulated and therefore, highly predictable. In one scene in the movie the mayor declares to the black-and-white residents of Pleasantville that "We are safe for the moment because we are in the bowling alley."

Can our churches sometimes be black-and-white bastions against growth, rather than colorful invitations to life?<sup>1</sup> Do we want to stay in our own safe black-and-white "bowling alleys," maintaining the status quo, rather than take the risks required to thrive in living color? Do we remain silent, like those disciples coming down from the mountain, rather than declaring the transformative power of the love of Jesus in our own lives and for the world?

Jesus was transfigured on the eighth day. We who now live in anticipation of the eighth day of creation when all things will be made new are called to tell the story. We modern-day disciples, living witnesses to the transformation of Christ, are not to remain silent anymore. We're called to live lives in living color, pushing beyond a black-and-white status quo, taking risks, demonstrating the transformative power of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

My prayer for all of us this day is that we may go forth, renewed by our retreat in worship and prayer. Renewed and empowered to go out and tell the story, to push beyond the status quo. Empowered to live lives of truly Christian love and to tell the story of how God has transformed your life into living color.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Gordon at *Textweek*, <http://www.textweek.com/movies/conversion.htm> (downloaded 2/13/2010).