

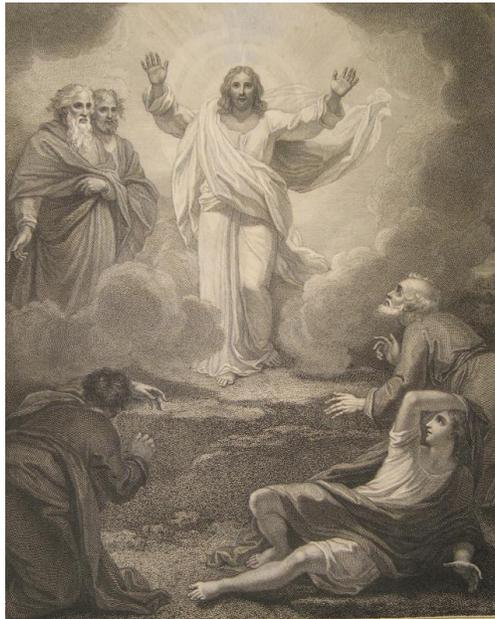
Transfiguration Sunday, February 14, 2021

“A Glimpse of Glory”

A Sermon Based on Mark 9:2-9

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

Mark 9:2-9 (New Revised Standard Version) ~ ² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said 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.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.



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First Christian Church

111 North Fifth St.

Murray, KY 42071

Transfiguration Sunday! This is one of my absolute favorite Sundays in the liturgical year when we peek in on an event that to our post-modern minds seems to be something almost out of a sci-fi movie or an LSD trip as we travel with Jesus and three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—up to the top of a mountain when suddenly Jesus gets “transfigured” or undergoes a kind of *metamorphosis* (μεταμόρφωσις). Up on the mountaintop, Jesus’ face shines like the sun, his clothes became dazzling white, Moses and Elijah appear out of nowhere speaking with him about the events ahead, and then suddenly they are overshadowed by a cloud with an audible voice speaking out of the cloud telling the disciples that Jesus is God’s beloved Son and they are to listen to him. The writer of Mark’s Gospel says that the disciples were “terrified.” I would have been too! I would have wondered whether I was hallucinating or having a psychotic break.

When we spoke about the Transfiguration during our gathering on Wednesday, I saw how those of us who come out of the Protestant tradition really don’t know how to approach this story. We try to tame it, rationalize it. We feel uncomfortable or even embarrassed. We’re part of that tradition that embarked on the quest for the historical Jesus, focusing on his social justice teachings, and we have tried to explain away the supernatural elements. We’ve lost the element of the Cosmic Christ that is so important to our brothers and sisters who come from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Did you know that for them the Transfiguration is the most important liturgical feast of the year? It is even bigger than Christmas or Easter. They pull out all the stops to celebrate the Transfiguration. An item near the top of my bucket list is to celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration in an Orthodox Church when it is held on August 6, which is its designated day. Sadly, in our emphasis on the historical Jesus within much of Protestantism, we have glossed over the Transfiguration as just another one of those miracle stories that ranks slightly below Jesus walking on water. There is no category of “Transfiguration” hymns in our Chalice hymnal. Ministers can choose whether or not to preach on it. So why is it such a big deal in the Orthodox Church? Because it is the great Cosmic Christ event that connects the historical Jesus to the risen or the Cosmic Christ.

A few years ago, I led a Lenten retreat on the “Cosmic Christ” that drew partly on the works of Matthew Fox’s book on the “Stations of the Cosmic Christ,” which offered a kind of alternative to the more traditional “Stations of the Cross,” and the more recent work of Richard Rohr on the “Universal Christ.” My theological world was shaken as my Protestant mind learned to read the Bible in a brand new way. I discovered there are actual “code words” that one needed to look for that were signifiers of divinity. When they come up in scripture they are shouting out “pay attention! Cosmic Christ”!

Let me tell you what some of the more important code words for the Cosmic Christ are as I ask you to listen for them as I work through today's scripture in a kind of Bible Study. They include:

- Certain numbers such as 3, 6, 12, 40
- Wilderness and mountains
- Angels
- The terms "Lord" or "Son of Man"
- Clouds
- Fire
- Glory
- Evil
- Light

The story of the Transfiguration is told in Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-9, and Luke 9:28-36. It is the same story but with slightly different emphases in each. Matthew, as he always does, sees Jesus in relation to Moses. Luke approaches the transfiguration within the framework of Jesus getting away to pray. Mark looks at the transfiguration in relation to what we call either the 'messianic secret' or 'messianic mystery,' namely reading the Cosmic Christ back into the historical Jesus.

This year we are called to look at the Transfiguration story in the Gospel of Mark, which focuses on the revealing of Jesus' true identity. Mark's transfiguration story begins with the words "***Six days later...***" That alerts us that we are to look back six days earlier to see what was going on. We learn that at that time Jesus was traveling with his disciples among the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Up until this point Jesus had been super secretive about his true identity and mission, even to his twelve disciples who traveled with him. But, for the first time, six days before he went up to the mountaintop, he asked his disciples to identify who he was. Listen to what it says in Mark 8:27-30:

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

And then Jesus alarmed Peter in particular, who had just declared that Jesus was the Messiah, when he began foretelling his death and resurrection. The scripture continues:

³¹ Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” ... ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

I hope that you noted the following code words in this passage that point to Jesus’ divinity: 3 days, Son of Man, glory, holy angels. Also remember the specific context within which Mark’s transfiguration story must be understood. It is located directly after Jesus asks his disciples who he is and Peter refuses to accept Jesus’ statement that Jesus would suffer, be rejected, be killed, and three days later rise again. Indeed, the argument between Peter and Jesus over this was so heated that they rebuked one another in public.

It was six days later that Jesus ascended the mountain. Code word alert: “6.” Those steeped in the Hebrew scripture would recall that God created the world in six days, before resting on the seventh with the creation of the Sabbath. Notably, when Moses, who is mentioned in this Transfiguration story, ascended the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, God’s glory covered the mountain in a cloud for six days (Exodus 25 to 31).

Today’s scripture goes on to say that “six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John” (vs. 2). Dorothy Richardson, one of our Wednesday evening participants, asked the interesting question “where is Andrew”? Up until now we have seen the two sets of brothers—Andrew and Simon Peter, James and John—accompanying Jesus. But now Andrew drops off the scene. Perhaps he is back in Capernaum attending to a family matter or off on an errand for Jesus. That there are only three of them is significant. When Moses ascended the mountain he took his three closest companions—Aaron, Abihu, and Nadab—to confirm the covenant (Exodus 24:1). Jesus also takes the three who form his inner circle, his “cabinet”—Peter, James, and John. We surmise their closeness to Jesus because they are the only ones to whom Jesus gives nicknames. He refers to James and John teasingly as the “sons of thunder” (Lk 5:10). Simon, whom he names Peter, is called “the rock.”

These three are not only at the Transfiguration but also when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter (Mark 9: 2; Luke 6: 51), when Jesus is on the Mount of Olives before entering Jerusalem (Mark 13:3), assisting in Passover preparations (Luke 22:8), and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37). The Orthodox Church has assigned them the three cardinal virtues with Peter representing faith, James hope, and John love. Additionally, the Mosaic code stated that a matter would be established if there were three witnesses present and testifying (Deuteronomy 19:15). Jesus needed three to witness the event that was to occur. So the mention of three disciples is significant.

The scripture continues: ***“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.”*** We have talked about the significance of “six days,” and “three disciples.” Here we have them climbing up a ***“high mountain.”*** Mountains, especially high mountains, is a significant “code” word shouting out that God is going to do something spectacular. Our passage doesn't say which “high mountain” it was but by the late fourth-century the church father Jerome identified it as Mount Tabor. The actual mountain is actually not all that important. What is important is what mountains represent in scripture, namely a “thin space” or a “threshold” where the boundaries between this world and the next are porous. Judy Fentress-Williams has said that: “In the ancient Near East, the mountain is considered a pillar of the earth, holding the sky in place. With its head reaching toward the heavens, the mountain ... is the bridge between earth, the realm of humans, and the heavens, the realm of the gods. ... [and is] the place for a divine encounter.” (*Feasting on the Word A/4*, p. 437)

Those close to the Transfiguration event would have thought back to other significant mountain top experiences in the Bible. Moses meets God in a burning bush and in a cloud up on Mount Sinai, where he receives the Ten Commandments (Exodus 25-31). The great prophet Elijah, who had confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18), goes up to the top of Mount Sinai and encounters God not in the powerful wind, earthquake, or fire but rather in a sound of sheer silence (I Kings 19:12).

We find ourselves with Jesus and his three disciples on the sacred geographical spot of a high mountain, against the backdrop of Peter challenging Jesus' statement that he is the ***“Son of Man”*** who ***“must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again”*** (Mark 8:31). Our scripture continues by saying what happens to Jesus when they reach the top: ***And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*** (Mark 9: 2-3).

Jesus, by being transfigured, definitely is identifying himself in his divine glory to Peter, James, and John as the “Son of Man.”

Matthew and Luke’s version both describe Jesus’ face radiating with light and shining (Matt 17:2; Lk 9:29), reminding us that when Moses comes back down after his mountaintop experience with God, **“the skin of his face was shining”** (Exodus 34:30). While in Mark’s version, unlike that of Matthew and Luke, there is no mention of Jesus’ face shining, the words “transfigured before them” suggests a radically altered appearance with his clothing being a brilliant white light unlike anything human beings could manufacture. Code word alert: “light” suggested by “dazzling white.” God is present in Jesus in a powerful way in which Jesus’ historical presence foretells his identity as the Cosmic Christ. When it says that Jesus became transfigured basically what it is saying is that the divinity of Jesus was revealed.

Listen to what happens next. ***And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.*** (Mark 9:4). I cannot emphasize enough what a big deal this is! For you to understand the significance of this, listen to the very last verses of the Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Malachi ends the Old Testament with these cliffhanging words of what the Hebrew people should expect and be waiting for:

⁴ Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.
(Malachi 4:4-5)

Peter, James, and John would have had these two heroes of their faith tradition, Moses and Elijah, etched in their minds and hearts. When they saw Jesus standing and talking to Moses and Elijah, they would have remembered what Malachi said. Moses and Elijah both had encounters (theophanies) with God on mountains. Moses is understood to represent the law; Elijah is meant to represent the prophets. They also represent the living and the dead. Elijah represents the living because he ascended directly in a whirlwind into the heavens (2 Kings 1:11). Moses represents the dead although, even though it clearly states in scripture that he died (Deut 34:4), **“no one knows his burial place to this day”** (Deut 34:5). Moses is associated with the past as we remember the Exodus story and are called to obey the commandments given by God to Moses at Mount Horeb (Mt.

Sinai). Elijah, in Jewish thought, represents the end times in the future. Elijah is the one who is coming to prepare the way of the Lord, to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming Messiah (Mal 4:5-6). While Mark's Gospel does not share the content of the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, the Gospel of Luke writes that they ***"were speaking of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem"*** (Lk 9:31). In sum, the conversation that Jesus has with Moses and Elijah symbolizes how Jesus fulfills "the law and the prophets" (Matthew 5:17-19).

Peter, James, and John are watching this unbelievable scene unfold before them. Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth they have been following about whose identity they are not clear, is standing with the two greats of their history that Malachi had spoken of in the final verses of their Hebrew scriptures: Moses representing the law and Elijah representing the prophets, all transfigured, radiating light. Their response? The scripture says that they were "terrified." Wouldn't you have been? Peter, the scripture tells us, doesn't know what to say but Peter being Peter has to say something because he always provides a running commentary, often putting his foot into his mouth. Peter blurts out ***"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"*** (vs. 5). Some have suggested that the word "dwellings" may refer to the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles when people built booths in a celebration of the harvest and God's redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Perhaps Peter wants to set up a museum to honor these three men. It is as though he wants to memorialize it, to capture a picture of Jesus alongside Moses and Elijah in a glorious, transfigured state to prevent Jesus' prophesy that he would suffer and die from coming true. He wants to freeze this moment, dreading what might come if Jesus' words come to pass. More than anything he wants to contain, control, and limit God.

And then, as if nothing more amazing could happen, as Peter was busy babbling on about this idea of his to build three dwellings ***"a cloud overshadowed them"*** (vs. 7). Code word alert: "cloud"! In Jewish writings, clouds are the vehicle of God's divine presence (the *Shekinah*). Remember the pillar of clouds that led the Israelites through the wilderness by day. Listen to what it says related to clouds in Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 24:15-16: ***¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.***

Just as God spoke to Moses from the cloud, listen to what happens in our Transfiguration story today: ***Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*** (vs. 7) God speaks from a cloud.

This not only takes us back to God speaking to Moses out of a cloud on Mt. Sinai but also to the moment where the season of Epiphany began: Jesus' baptism. Mark's Gospel describes this event as follows: ⁹*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.* ¹⁰*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.* ¹¹*And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* (Mark 1:9-11)

Here, for the second of only three times the New Testament, God speaks audibly from a cloud (or heaven). At Jesus' baptism God spoke directly to Jesus, with no indication that anyone else heard this voice. Jesus, you are my Beloved and I am well pleased with you. On the mountaintop, God spoke again out of a cloud but this time God's voice was addressed to Jesus' disciples. "Peter, James, and John, Jesus is my Beloved Son, listen to him." Almost as if to say to Peter, listen to what Jesus told you about his true identity when he said that he is the Son of God who must suffer, die, but will be raised again on the third day. Listen to him! Additionally, we should see the beautiful portrait of the Trinity here, both at Jesus' baptism at which the season of Epiphany begins, and the Transfiguration at which it ends. Indeed, in Eastern Orthodoxy the Feast of the Transfiguration is primarily a feast of the Holy Trinity for all three persons of the Godhead are present. God the Father speaks from the clouds / heaven: This is my beloved son. God the Son is the form of the historical Jesus who is transfigured. God the Holy Spirit is present in the form of the cloud.

No sooner do the disciples hear this voice speaking from the cloud when they turn around and see that Moses and Elijah have vanished, poof, into thin air. Only Jesus is still present. As they were walking back down the mountain Jesus *ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.* (Mark 9:9). Code word alert: Son of Man! Peter, James, and John might have remembered rabbis in the synagogue saying that in the apocalyptic literature such as Daniel there is mention of the "Son of Man" coming on the clouds of heaven, who receives glory and kingship. It is a loaded term that represents a figure of cosmic power but who is also connected to the Suffering Servant of Israel. Thus, glory and suffering go hand in hand in the Transfiguration story. So back down the mountain they go continuing the conversation about whether the prophet Elijah had indeed come (in Matthew 17:13 Jesus confirms that John the Baptist is Elijah), what this rising from the dead could mean, but also agreeing to "keep this matter to themselves" (Mark 9:10).

Jesus likely knew that they would have to wait until later to fully understand what had just happened up on the mountaintop.

Who was the transfiguration meant for? Who needed to experience it? The transfiguration on the mountaintop was not meant for Jesus, in the same way that the mountaintop experience was not meant for Moses. Rather the mountaintop experiences were designed to strengthen their followers. After Moses came down from Mt Sinai, his people embarked on a 40-year difficult and dangerous journey through the wilderness. When things got tough and their faith was beginning to falter, they could go back and share the story of how Moses returned from the top of the mountain with his face glowing, indicating that he had been in the presence of God. After Jesus came down from the mountain, the scriptures say that **“he set his face toward Jerusalem”** (Lk 9:51), willingly and knowingly approaching his fate on the cross. Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountaintop was designed to strengthen the faith of Peter, James, and John as they entered into the terrifying days of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, beating, and crucifixion. It gave them a glimpse, something they could hold onto, of the promise of the Resurrected Jesus in his glory. And it worked! It was the transfiguration that affirmed for Peter that Jesus was, indeed, the “Son of Man,” the “Messiah.” We know this because, many years later Peter who moved into the larger shoes of being “the rock” went on to write these bold and faith-filled words (2 Peter 1:16-19):

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

We are about to end the season of Epiphany where we have experienced miraculous events: the visitation of the Magi who had followed a star to find the true King; Jesus’ baptism; his triumph over evil during his forty days in the wilderness; the beginning of his teaching ministry when he taught as one with authority; the healing of the man with the unclean spirit and Simon Peter’s mother-in-law; his Transfiguration. These have been mountaintop experiences indeed where we have witnessed the glory of Jesus.

But now, like Peter, James, and John we are coming down off the mountain to walk into the forty-day wilderness valley of Lent. May this story of the Transfiguration challenge and sustain you as this Wednesday we begin our forty-day Lenten journey to the cross where we too will have to embrace the reality of Jesus' suffering.

Closing Prayer: O Holy God, on the day of the Transfiguration you lifted the veil between heaven and earth to reveal your glory. In your son Jesus, we saw your love and light radiate. Help us, like Peter, James, and John to listen to Him. Help us also reflect that light and love to all those around us. In the name of Jesus, your Beloved Son, we pray. Amen.

Blessing (Numbers 6:24-26, NRSV):

²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.