

Becoming Transfigured

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Feb. 22, 2009

II Kings 2:1-12a

II Corinthians 4: 3-6

Mark 9: 2-9

I have a long history with the “Jesus Being Transfigured” story. I never liked the story, couldn't relate to it, and mostly succeeded in just ignoring it until 1993, when, according to my records, I finally attempted to write a sermon on this text. The transfiguration story has a prominent place in the gospels and also in lectionary, where it is assigned on the Sunday before Lent, which is called the “Sunday of the Transfiguration of our Lord” in high church traditions. Every year for about 30 years I chose to do something other on the Sunday of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

We are not high church, and I succeeded in pretending the story wasn't there. I figured that this thing was more in the realm of fantasy than reality. But I got to the point where it was a matter of integrity for me to deal with the story instead of ignoring it. When I began working on it, lo and behold, I discovered that a lot of Biblical scholars agreed with my assessment of it. The transfiguration is considered, by some scholars, a hallucinatory experience on the part of the disciples, who may have been really worn out from climbing up that mountain with Jesus.

Other scholars give it a more sober judgment but still dismiss it as something that some early church scribe misplaced in the text. Somehow, somebody in the early church put this story in as a kind of “prefiguration” for the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is shown to be communing with Moses and Elijah as a kind of prediction for what was to come.

Somewhere along the way I ran into a joke which I thought explained the transfiguration story quite well. It seems that mountain climbers use ropes to tie themselves to

each other, for reasons of safety and helping each other up the mountainside. But lately, it has been discovered that the real reason mountain climbers tie themselves together is to keep those who are SANE from going home.

Well, that casts a whole new light on the story. Is it possible that climbing a mountain with Jesus in order to see him hobnobbing with Moses and Elijah could be an exercise in insanity? Don't laugh! Some Biblical scholars make that point quite seriously. They call it an attempt at having an experience of religious ecstasy, which is just a nice way of saying that the disciples left their sanity at home when they climbed that mountain.

Well, hang on to your seats, folks. I am about to make a case for this story, which you might find hard to believe after my introduction. I am going to spend the rest of my time this morning trying to convince you that the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is about you and me, and that it is important for us to understand and appreciate transfiguration because transfiguration is the most important, as well as the most difficult task we face in this life.

How has it come about that one episode about a mountaintop experience several millenia ago has grabbed me and has shaken me into a new appreciation of its meaning? Well, it came about as follows: I was asked to prepare a sermon for this congregation for any Sunday of my choice in the month of February. I chose February 22 in order to give myself the most time to prepare. Little did I realize, when I made the choice, that this year the last Sunday in February is the Sunday of the Transfiguration of our Lord, the very one that had given me so many headaches in the past. Having made the choice, I decided to stick with it, and I dutifully looked up the lectionary passages assigned to this day, thinking that I could always go to the Old Testament text or the epistle reading for something else more interesting. Please — not that transfiguration story again!

When I scanned the Old Testament reading assigned for today, something began

clicking in my mind. Elijah comes to the end of his earthly pilgrimage. It's time to call it quits. He must leave, but his devoted follower and fellow worker Elisha cannot let him go. Elijah's exit becomes quite an elaborate transfiguration production, involving a fiery chariot that comes down out of heaven to pick him up, and as he is taking off toward the heavens, Elijah disrobes, rolls up his mantle and hurls it back to earth for Elisha to pick up. Wow! What an "end of life" transfiguration story, I thought. It has obvious connections with the Jesus story, since Jesus was likewise coming to the end of his ministry on this earth. It was time for the baton to be passed to others. Like Elijah, Jesus was about to pass his mantle on to his successor.

Then I scanned the epistle reading assigned for today, and I came upon another of those revelations that simply would not let me go off and do something else more interesting. Paul writes, "our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to the unbelievers. The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel..." (II Corinthians 4:6)

Now what do you suppose that says to someone who has avoided writing a sermon on the transfiguration of Jesus for 30 years because his own eyes were blinded to its meaning, having sold himself to the gods of this world, the gods who teach us to analyze, relativize, psychoanalyze, historicize and criticize? I came to realize that for 30 years I had quite deliberately chosen to be the unbeliever, and I had missed out on the "light that shines in the darkness to give our hearts the knowledge of the glory of God..." (II Corinthians 4:6)

We could spend a lot of time talking about all the transfigurations that you and I experience, and how we must learn from them. Some of us get transfigured from being followers into being leaders. We get transfigured from being lovers into being husbands and wives, and then again when we become parents and grandparents. These are all important

transitions in our lives, and we must deal with them. We have all recently experienced one of the most dramatic transfigurations in the history of our nation, when the descendants of slaves, for the first time, have moved into the White House.

As important as such transitions are, it would be trivializing transfiguration to talk as if every change that we encounter in life is the real stuff of transfiguration. Sometimes the transitions we encounter are crucial. Sometimes they become major revelations to us. My dictionary, however, tells me that transfiguration is a change so as to glorify, exalt and idealize something. That is, something changes into something other than itself.

The elephant in the room that I want to talk about is the one that looms ahead for each and every person on this planet. Not a single one of us will be excused from dealing with the final and most definitive transfiguration of all — the one that comes to us at the end, when our work is done and when the final accounting of our life takes place. It's the one that comes when we take off our mantle and throw it down for the next generation to pick up.

Brothers and sisters, the rubber hits the road where the chariot of fire takes off. So what is this glorification and exaltation that I am talking about? What exactly are we required to do when our work is done, and when we cast our mantle to those who follow us? This is precisely where we are so easily seduced by the gods of this world, to do anything BUT glorify, anything BUT exalt the work of our hands. The gods of this world teach us that we must iconocize, concretize, solidify, codify, archive and inscribe on tablets of granite all the accomplishments of our lives, so that those who follow us know who we were and what we did.

I went to a church academy during my high school years, and while there, I encountered a man who became an important mentor for me. No, he was not a preacher. No, he was not a writer or a man of great rhetorical ability. He was my industrial arts shop

instructor. He took me back into the shop and showed me how to operate a welder. He taught me how to use a lathe, a joiner, a planer, a table saw, a press drill, glue clamps and much more. (See, I still have all my 10 fingers!) I learned copper beading from him, which I thought was about the most useless thing I had ever learned from anyone. Truth be told, I didn't want to be in any of his classes. I was taking vocational agriculture courses under the dictates of my parents who were sending me to this academy to prepare me to take over the family farm.

But Freedley Schrock was a different kind of parent for me. He simply showed me what I could learn and gave some guidance on how to learn it. He never made assignments, just suggestions. I thought he was far too gentle a man to be a good teacher. I was accustomed to sterner stuff from my father. I spent three years in Freedley Schrock's care, and I came away with a new experience on how an older person can guide a young kid with respect and gentleness.

Several years ago, in my late-60s, I began to realize how important this man had actually been in my life, and I began to wish I could go back and talk to him and thank him for being much more important in my life than he or I would have ever suspected. But Freedley had long since died. During his lifetime it never occurred to me to thank Freedley Schrock for anything. Then one day last year I got a letter, informing me that Freedley Schrock's son, who had become a successful physician, had died and had left a substantial bequest in his will for the specific purpose of building a monument to his father on the Hesston College campus. His son did this out of a simple belief that his father had never been given credit for the profound influence he had on his students. Written tributes to Freedley were being solicited. I wrote a long, heartfelt tribute. But I suspected all the while that if Freedley knew about the plans for a memorial, he would be spinning in his grave in protest. Freedley knew very well that his real work was not to help us high school kids learn how to make bird houses and table lamps. He

had long ago glorified and exalted his work. I know this from the simple, pious prayers he prayed at the beginning of every shop class. He did not pray that we farm boys would weld a straight bead. He prayed that we would walk the straight path that would lead us to glory.

The ultimate transfiguration, which becomes our ultimate task, is to consign our earthly work to the realm of the spiritual. That is to say, we must box up whatever our earthly accomplishments might be, and send them UP — UPS on that fiery chariot straight to heaven.

If you and I cannot transfigure,
Then what we do cannot get bigger.
If you and I cannot transfigure,
Our bird houses on earth
Cannot be mansions in heaven.

This is not an “end of life” issue. Sometimes that fiery chariot arrives before we are ready to call it quits. There is a publication on the table out there in the foyer with the bold title on its cover, *Beyond Ourselves — Transitions*. It is the publication of the Mennonite Mission Network. It is filled with 23 pages of stories about how Mennonite mission workers have had to cast their mantle to the next generation before their work was done and before they were ready to leave India, Burkina Faso, Congo, Argentina and many others. The whole issue is filled with stories of endings. But guess what, these “endings,” as we call them, have all become incredible new beginnings in those same countries where Mennonite mission workers thought that their exit would lead to the demise of all that they had worked for faithfully over many years.

There is the story of Carol and Jonathan Bornman, who have worked for 12 years in Senegal, helping people start small businesses while also building the church. The work is not done, but they have come to feel that it is time to leave. As Jonathan writes: “We want the

gospel to be incarnated into the flesh of the Wolof people. I see only one way this can happen — when we missionaries step out of the way and support what God is already doing among the Wolof people.” Carol has been accepted at American University where she will begin her graduate studies next fall. They and their three children will be moving to the Washington D.C. area this summer.

When Peter witnessed his beloved teacher entering the realm of heaven in the company of Moses and Elijah, he immediately did what so many of us want to do. “Let's preserve this moment in stone. Let's build a monument. One for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

But the building of monuments was not to be. The task for Peter was to leave the razzle dazzle on the mountaintop. Leave it there in the care of Moses and Elijah who will glorify it and take it to heaven. But Peter must go down from the mountain to enter into the disfigurations of humanity.

As Jesus and the disciples descend from the mountain, a spastic child with a long history of bizarre behaviors is brought to them. Jesus is no longer dazzling in whiteness. The child is foaming at the mouth, out of control. Without fanfare, with no theatrics, Jesus takes the convulsive boy by the hand and lifts him up from his crawling and groveling on the ground. He calls forth the inner strength of the child to fear his demons no more, to stand up and take charge of his behavior in the presence of his family.

If Jesus has taken us to the mountaintop and bedazzled us, we must follow him back down into the valleys of our existence where we will encounter the disfigurations of humanity. Our own transfiguration will happen only as we descend from the mountain, and not as we seek to preserve the ascendancy.

Jesus leads us down after he had led us up.

Jesus leads us-- not to bask.

Jesus leads us-- to our task. Amen.