

## Transfiguration: Changed—it matters

Transfiguration Sunday appears annually on our church calendar. It is a delineation point within the church year. Advent begins our year with the liturgical color purple or blue which becomes white with Christmas' arrival until after Epiphany. Except for services where Communion is celebrated, it becomes green and remains so until the Sunday after we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord on a mountaintop before three of his closest disciples. Ash Wednesday comes this week which marks our entry into considering the journey to the cross with the season of Lent. So next Sunday our paraments will again be purple and the cross out front will be draped in that color as a sign, a symbol of the season. The church chose this event as the boundary we cross to begin another season of preparation—this one marked with much darker themes and images, of suffering and death. Before we enter that season we are given one more revelation of the divine on that mountaintop; one more occasion for God to reveal something important to us. Jesus has just told the disciples for the first time what his identity as the Messiah means—that it will lead to suffering and death—not the end of oppression by the Romans or the restoration of the nation state of Israel. The disciples do not greet this news well-denying what Jesus is telling them. Our passage today begins: “six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.” Many important events in Scripture happen on mountaintops—that is where God is most often encountered. In the next verse we get this description of Jesus, whom they had been journeying with about the countryside which indicates that somehow Jesus does not appear the same. “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” One minute he was their friend and teacher and the next, he appeared very differently to them. The word used in the Greek for this appearance is transfigured—which we often view as Jesus being somehow transformed. Certainly the description of his face shining like the sun and his clothes being dazzling white seems like Jesus' appearance has changed, been transformed in the eyes of his disciples. But if we look a little deeper into the text we notice that the word is transfigured—not transformed. We tend to think they are the same thing, but they aren't. Transfiguration is defined in both the Greek Lexicon and our own dictionary as to change the outward appearance or form—to change the appearance of the figure. Transformation, although it can be just that, often is understood to be something a little more substantial—a change in the condition, nature of function of something—to change the character or nature of someone or something. That goes beyond appearance and that is what matters in this instance—Jesus has not changed, only his appearance to the disciples has been altered. That is why the Transfiguration of Jesus matters. Transfiguration is not an everyday word which is probably why we usually just substituted transformation in that place in our minds; perhaps thinking that this is just a onetime thing and applies only to this passage. But the description of what the disciples saw is one that is deeply connected to the entire season of Epiphany—God's announcement, God' revelation of who Jesus is. Jesus' transfiguration is not so much change as revelation. A literal translation of the verse is that Jesus was revealed to be shining—he was a source of light. In the passage we read from Exodus this morning the descriptions are of the glory of the Lord. The appearance of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain hidden within the cloud which descended upon Sinai. Moses goes into the cloud and spends forty days and nights there receiving from

the Lord the instructions for the covenant people. Because the people began to doubt and turn away from the one who brought them out of Egypt's slavery, Moses has to go again up to the mountain. In the later passage from Exodus 34:29-35 we find that the prolonged encounter with God has given Moses a shining face—a light so intense that he begins to go veiled. Throughout Scripture an encounter with God is always associated with intense light. In addition to Moses shining face after an encounter with God, heavenly beings who appear in both the Book of Daniel and the gospel of Mark are clothed in white as are the heavenly beings surrounding the throne of God in Revelation...So when on the mountaintop with Jesus the disciples suddenly see the divine shining in Jesus this is described in terms of dazzling light, light comparable to the sun. This is a further revelation—another epiphany where God proclaims Jesus' identity and the disciples are seeing the glory with their own eyes. And this revelation creates a change in the disciples understanding about Jesus—After all, they were not there with the shepherds when the angels appeared, nor at his baptism when the voice from heaven proclaimed him as the beloved Son. On that mountain, the three disciples find themselves in the presence of something beyond easy analysis, whether scientific or psychological, internal and spiritual or external and objective. It was the moment when those three disciples finally saw Jesus for who he was. They saw that the young Rabbi from Nazareth—thirty something, popular but increasingly controversial was more than just another fine teacher. They saw, perhaps clearly for the first time, that the man they had been following for two or three years was a man—but somehow more than a mere man. In that moment they glimpsed—ineffably—that he was not only Jesus the man, but also Jesus the Christ—the anointed one. A voice falls on their ears or rises in their hearts, and they somehow apprehend God's truth: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." The scene described in this passage is heavy with symbols. First—the physical change the disciples see in their Master bespeaks their deepened understanding of who he is. He's not simply an enthralling young Rabbi, not simply his own invention; rather he is the Promised One. To represent the fulfillment of ancient promise they see Elijah, the first and the father of the prophets. And they see Moses, the giver of the Law. For Jesus was also a giver of law—a new law—the Law of Love. Of course we don't know in the empirical or scientific sense what happened up on that mountaintop. But whatever it was, I believe with all my being that God was in it. And because God was in it what was revealed to those disciples is also revealed to us. The message speaks the same word to you and me that Peter, James and John heard that day—This was and is God's "Beloved Son" and we must listen to him. After Easter, after Jesus' death and resurrection, the church—those who did their best to "listen to him" began speaking about themselves in a curious way. They called themselves the "body of Christ" in the world. The point was that Jesus' literal physical body was not longer in the world, but his Spirit was. And the church was where those who listened gathered. There are a lot of people today who want to un-transfigure Jesus, as it were. They want to shrink Jesus down so that he nothing more than a human teacher who preached love and forgiveness. They want to reduce Jesus the Christ to just another of history's nice guys who got treated shabbily. But the unambiguous witness of Scripture is that Jesus cannot be crammed into these little categories of "just" or "only." He was and is—in the vocabulary of Transfiguration—"God's Beloved, God's Son." He was and is—in the traditional Jewish language—"The Messiah," "The Anointed One", "The Christ." The Transfiguration can serve as a wonderful symbol of the center of our faith, a kind of vision of the end and the ultimate.

Jesus shines with God-light. The Transfiguration matters fundamentally on many levels because the three disciples saw who Jesus was—not just a man of God who could perform healing miracles and taught the Law with authority but was and is God in human form with the divine light shining. The Transfiguration matters today because we also need to perceive the divine revealed in all of Jesus’ actions—and listen carefully to the message he brought. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.