

Explaining Mysteries

The event described in today's gospel reading is actually one of those found in each of the synoptic gospels so the early church found this a matter of great importance. But just what was the event? The basics of the narrative are simple. Jesus takes three of his closest disciples, Peter, James and John on a hike up a mountain leaving the others behind. These disciples are the ones who figure most prominently in all the gospel narratives. They have been there from the beginning as they are the first called. When this group reaches the mountain top, we are told that Jesus was transfigured. And there we reach what seems to be a mystery. Just what does it mean to be transfigured? A check of the dictionary will reveal that the verb means to change the figure. Since putting the prefix "trans" in front of any verb adds that concept of change or some type of movement to any verb—that definition is simple, but it still doesn't tell what is happening on that mountain top. There is a second entry where the word becomes a noun—transfiguration---and it is clear that the noun's only context is that it is a reference to this gospel event. In our text however, what happens is not a noun, but a verb and a verb in the passive voice. This transfiguration was not something that Jesus did, but something that happened to Jesus. The text tells us that Jesus was "transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white as no one on earth could bleach them." This tells us about the change in Jesus' clothing, but not really anything about Jesus' appearance. At this point Elijah and Moses, two of the most revered from Hebrew tradition show up on this mountain to speak with Jesus. The disciples see them but evidently aren't included in the conversation. What happens next seems to be the key to this passage. Peter, always the first to speak, says 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." Peter wants to stay on the mountain and put these three individuals in a box, so to speak. My mother loved a comic strip called Calvin and Hobbs. In that strip Calvin had a big cardboard box which he called a "transmogrifier". This box was a machine which Calvin told Hobbs would turn you into something other than what you already are. Set the dial to the desired new thing and you become that something. Peter's suggestion of building booths or dwellings and Jesus' dazzling appearance is somewhat like putting Jesus in Calvin's box and setting the dial to "Son of God." In an instant, Jesus appears to be someone other than this man they know as Joseph's boy from Nazareth. He looks markedly, substantively different. He has been transmogrified, and those who walked with him up the mountain can't help but notice the difference. But in each of the gospel accounts we are about halfway through the journey to the cross. Much has happened prior to this mountain top experience. Demons have been cast out. Lepers healed. A girl has been brought back to life. Jesus has walked on water. Thousands have been fed from a loaf and two fish. And Peter has even declared Jesus' identity to be the Messiah. The disciples have been present for all of these things before Moses and Elijah appear and before God's voice from the cloud proclaims "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him". What do Peter, James and John know after this event that they didn't know before? What has changed? In reality, what changes is that they now see Jesus in a whole new light. All they knew and had witnessed, as miraculous and astounding as these things were, did not reveal the entirety of Jesus' identity to them. Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah gets prophetic, historic and transcendent confirmation through the Transfiguration. Jesus is

indeed the Messiah, the one of whom the prophets spoke, the one who fulfills the law represented by Moses, the one who is from God and of God and to whom they should listen. Although this Sunday is liturgically given a special name, it is also the last Sunday in Epiphany. Epiphany is another special date on the church calendar. It is the date that celebrates the revelation of God, the Son as a human being in Jesus Christ. It is the celebrations of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi who show up to honor this future king. This Sunday is also the last one before Ash Wednesday which begins the season of Lent which is the season of preparation for considering Christ's journey to the cross. In Mark's gospel, this narration of the Transfiguration is placed between two accounts of Jesus' telling the disciples what it means to be the Messiah—he predicts his Passion. Jesus, dazzlingly clothed, flanked by Elijah and Moses, heralded by God, will be the one who is betrayed, killed and who in three days will rise from the dead, his appearance different yet again, but his identity the same. Jesus is not, after all, transmogrified—changed from one thing to another. Jesus of Nazareth is the beloved Son of God, the Messiah, fully human, fully divine, executed, buried, raised and ascended. He will not and cannot be contained by booth or by grave. No wonder seeing him fully has left the disciples at a loss for words. Peter, James and John see Jesus in a whole new light on that mountain top. A new light so bright, so otherworldly that they are left terrified and tongue-tied. Jesus, the one who heals the sick and walks on water, the Messiah, is the Son of God, the fulfillment of the law and prophets, the one alone to whom they should listen and follow. Perhaps the greatest change which takes place on the mount is not in the appearance of Jesus, but in the perception, the understanding by those with him of the magnitude and majesty of their Savior. Perhaps in seeing Jesus in a whole new light, there is the hope that they will begin to see themselves and this mission they will be given in a whole new light, too. Their first response, expressed by Peter was to stay on the mountain top, to put Jesus, Elijah and Moses in dwellings—to contain them. But the visit of Elijah and Moses did not last long. After God spoke from the cloud telling them to listen to Jesus, they looked around and only Jesus was left with them. As they then journey down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to speak of this experience until after he has risen from the dead. This journey down the mountain begins with the hard truth that the Messiah does not allow his disciples to stay in safe places far above the chaos and needs of the world. Like him, they are called to go down the mountain, to listen to and obey the teachings of God's beloved Son. Like them, we are also called to go into the valleys of the world, not stay on the mountain tops. In the Psalm for today in a verse beyond the lectionary selection there is a verse in which God speaks to the psalmist saying: "you thought that I was one just like yourself." In some sense, I think that the disciples thought Jesus, while not exactly like themselves, thought he was basically more similar than different. That perception was changed on the mountain top. They still did not understand fully as they left the mountain top questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Trying to explain the mysteries revealed to us through Scripture is rather like trying to place God in a box or build a dwelling place for God on the mountain top and expect God to remain there. The message of the Transfiguration is not so much about what happened to Jesus on that mountain top, but what should happen to us when we perceive the reality of who Jesus is, especially in our own lives, as we follow and listen to Jesus and are then transformed. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

