



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Transformed

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus (Mark 2:2-4).*

Peter, James, and John have been following Jesus for a while, along with nine others who, though they don't know it yet, will come to be called apostles. They've seen him do all sorts of marvelous things: healing individuals, casting out demons, putting people back in their right minds.

And he's taught them things too. Some of it was by way of reminder, like the fact that they should love God and love their neighbors as themselves. They'd heard that in the synagogue, but even familiar things sound different when they come from Jesus. He has this air about him, a kind of authority that comes not from any title or position, but from his own person. Jesus doesn't need credentials. He's compelling all by himself.

Jesus is unlike anyone they've ever known. Now he pulls Peter, James, and John aside and takes them high up on a mountain. Why them? Why not the other nine? Why doesn't everybody get to have the same mountaintop experience? We don't know. The disciples don't know either, except that Jesus has called them, and so they go.

It turns out, Jesus wants them to see something – something altogether wonderful. Now, up here on this mountain where no one else is around, there comes a light. It's a brilliant, white light, but it doesn't come from the sun,

or any other outside source. It comes from Jesus himself. He's ... what would you call it? ... he's transfigured somehow.

You'd have to invent a word to describe what happens, because no one has ever seen this. He's still the same man, still Jesus of Nazareth, but now there is this incredible radiance about him. Once in a while we might say that a person looks radiant. A woman, when she smiles from someplace deep inside, can look radiant. A child full of love and delight might look radiant. But this is different, something infinitely greater. Jesus seems to light up his whole being, and the light is so bright that even his clothes turn a dazzling white.

Then, all of a sudden, two figures show up beside him. They're there, but not quite *here* – as if they've broken in from some universe next door, standing at the intersection of heaven and earth. They turn out to be Moses and Elijah. After a while, it occurs to Peter that here were the giver of the law and the greatest of the prophets, and it's as if the law and the prophets were all pointing to Jesus. But that only comes to him later, when he's had time to think about it. For the moment what Peter says is, "It's good that we're here, Rabbi! We can make you some tents, some booths—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

What a dumb thing to say. If we don't laugh when we hear it, we're missing part of the point. Make some tents? Build you some booths? Really? Is that what Jesus needs right now, he and his visitors from who knows where? Do they really need some kind of shelter? Years later, Peter will pass this story on to Mark, and Mark will write it down, adding, I suspect, with a little smile, "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

We don't know what to say when we stand at the edge of our experience, do we? Something terrifying, or even something wonderful. We don't know what to say on the boundaries of life: at the birth of a baby, or the death of a loved one; or even in the middle of life, when beauty overwhelms us.

That's because language is for ordinary things. Words are for the stuff of everyday life, for buying food at the store and telling the kids what they may and may not do; for running a business and relaying what happened during our day. But on the edge of experience, in the extremes of beauty and tragedy, joy and sorrow, words fail us altogether. That's why we're tempted to say silly things, instead of just being present in silence.

So Peter says something silly when he sees Jesus transfigured, with Moses and Elijah beside him. But we can understand that, because Peter is Everyman, and we don't know what to say either.

Then Peter does something else we're tempted to do, which is to reframe Jesus in more familiar terms. Peter wants to build some booths, because that's what his religion prompts him to do. His people have a Festival of Booths, looking back to Moses and the Exodus, and forward to the Messiah, with Elijah as his messenger. Peter's impulse is to reduce this great mystical moment to ordinary religion, to make it manageable in terms of familiar rules and rituals.

We're tempted to do that, too, aren't we? We're tempted to reduce Christ to Christianity, to make a religion out of Jesus, instead of following him up whatever mountain he calls us to climb and doing whatever he tells us to do.

We want to make Jesus manageable, to fit him in to our other priorities. Jesus says to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, but we're tempted to boil that down to having some opinions about God, and showing up in church, and hoping God will get us out of trouble in this life, and reunite us with loved ones in the life to come. We're often inclined to let it go at that.

Jesus wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, which would imply that we want for others the same basic things we want for ourselves, and that we'd try hard to see that they have those things. But we're tempted to make love a sentimental thing, a moment of sympathy for those less fortunate – as if our sympathy did them any good without our efforts to help. Jesus says, “When I was hungry, did you feed me? When I was sick, did you care for me?” But we're tempted to respond by bringing some canned goods to the food bank and hoping people get better, as long as we don't have to pay too much for the cost of their care.

We're tempted to reduce Jesus to religion, and a manageable religion at that. It's Peter's first impulse too. Just build some booths in the presence of the prophets.

But then Peter, James, and John have time to absorb what happened to them on that mountain. The light that came from Jesus finds its way over time into the depths of their souls, and that changes everything.

Jesus was transfigured before them, and then the disciples themselves were transformed. They finally saw who he really is; and when that happened, they knew that the only sensible thing to do was to follow him the rest of their lives. They knew they had to live for him, and try to do whatever he asked of them. Even the booths Peter wanted

to build appeared, in retrospect, like an impulse to pitch his tent in the presence of the Lord – as if that was the place where he truly belonged.

Some people want to reduce Jesus to just another great teacher, to make him more manageable, rather than be managed by him. But no one who has seen the transfigured Christ, or met the risen Lord, wants to do that. They know how silly that would be.

A man named Saul of Tarsus would be so transformed by Christ that he came to be called St. Paul, after his own blinding encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul went on to say of Jesus: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation .... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” That’s because, as the voice said on that mountain of transfiguration, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.”

If that’s who Jesus really is, then what is there to do, but to live for him?

How could Jesus – who shines so bright on the mountain, and rises from the dead, and meets us as a brilliant, loving light on the way into heaven itself – how could this Jesus become just another sage on the shelf with the Harvard Classics?

How could the church – the community of disciples called to be the body of Christ in this world, reaching out with glad and generous hearts to care for others in Jesus’ name – how could the church become just a place where people show up once in a while, instead of shaping an entire way of life?



No, the people who know the transfigured Christ become transformed themselves over time. When the Spirit of Christ lives in them, they are transfigured too. A light shines through them which, if not as bright as Christ himself, still reflects the love of Christ. And the world can see that light in the way they live. As Paul says again, “you are a letter of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

That’s why Transfiguration Sunday comes just before Lent: because this Jesus, whose life and death and resurrection we celebrate, turns out to be the light of the world. And the world, caught up in all its tribal conflicts and self-centered pursuits, desperately needs to see that light.

So let us become, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, the kind of people who reflect the light of Christ in the way we live, now and always, here and everywhere. Let us become living letters of Christ.



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