

Transfiguration, February 23, 2020

(Mt 17:1-9; Ex 24:12-18; 2 Pet 1:16-19; Ps 2)

Today we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord. This always happens the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent—and you know that the end of Lent brings us to Holy Week, which ends with the death of Jesus on the cross. So many of our Lenten texts focus on the darker side of Jesus' life.

I have three questions about today's gospel:

How did the disciples know?

Was Peter embarrassed?

Has Jesus ever touched *you*?

You may have different questions, like

Six days after *what*?

What does *transfigured* really mean?

Why did Jesus tell them not to tell anyone?

I'll answer your questions first. *The Transfiguration of our Lord* took place *six days after* Jesus' first-of-three predictions that he would suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised to life. That was the time when Peter said to Jesus, **Never, Lord! This must never happen to you!** -- To which Jesus replied?? (get behind me, Satan!) **You're a stumbling block to me. You're setting your mind on *human* things, not on the things of God!**

Then Jesus went on to say, **Those who want to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for me will find it. . . . And what can you give in exchange for your soul?**

This *context* is important for understanding today's gospel.

What does *transfigured* mean? It means *changed*, transformed. In our gospel text it wasn't the *form* of Jesus which changed, but his *appearance*. Fully human, Jesus walked up a high mountain with Peter, James, and John—and then all of a sudden **his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white**. Not as if there were a bright spotlight shining on him, but rather as if *he* were the spotlight. It was Jesus himself who was radiant. *Transfigured*.

Why did Jesus command his disciples not to tell what they had seen, **until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead**? This is called the *messianic secret*, the “secret of/about the Messiah.” He didn't want people flocking to him to see miracles or signs. He wanted them to *listen to him*—just as the voice from the cloud said, **This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him**.

Now to my first question: *How did they know*? How did Peter and James and John know who the two people with Jesus were? How could they have recognized two men from 1500 and 600 years ago, when there were no photographs or sketches or paintings??? What made the disciples think—or *know*—they were Moses and Elijah?

My guess would be the Holy Spirit. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes about the power and presence of the Holy Spirit: **By the Spirit we cry *Abba, Father* (8:16) and the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (8:26)**. All who walked with Jesus knew the Hebrew scriptures, and Moses and Elijah were two of the shining lights of holy history.

My second question asked *if Peter was embarrassed*. Let's review the situation. Immediately after Jesus was *transfigured* before them, Moses and Elijah appeared.

Peter—yes, the one Jesus had just a week earlier called *Satan*—Peter began to speak: **Lord, it's a good thing we're here. I can put up three shelters, one for each of you!**

While he was still speaking, there was a bright light and a voice from the cloud. – I wonder, did Peter realized that he'd been interrupted *by God?* Peter's babbling, and God breaks in and basically says, *Hush, Peter! This is my beloved Son—listen to him!*

My final question was, *has Jesus ever touched you?* When the disciples heard the voice of God, they **fell to the ground, overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up! Don't be afraid."** The touch of Jesus gives *peace: Fear not!*

The touch of Jesus gives *healing*: The twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus, leader of the synagogue, appeared dead. Jesus took her by the hand, and she got up and walked (Mark 5:41-2). The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years simply touched his cloak, and was instantly healed (Mk 5:27-29). He touched a leper, and the leprosy was cleansed (Mat 8:3); and Peter's mother-in-law, and the fever left her (Mat 8:15). The touch of Jesus gives *healing*.

The touch of Jesus gives *life*: In Luke's gospel Jesus touched the coffin which held the son of the widow of Nain, and the dead man sat up (Lk 7:14-15); and in John's gospel he had merely to speak to recall Lazarus from the dead: **Lazarus, come out! And the dead man came out** (Jn 11:43-44). The touch of Jesus healed more lepers, and the blind, and the lame, and the deaf and mute, restoring them to *life* in a society which had cast them out. The touch of Jesus gives *life*.

If Jesus were to reach out and touch *you*, what would be healed? What part of your brokenness would be redeemed? What pain would become easier to bear? What anxiety would be eased, what fear quieted? What doubt or wondering would become clear?

In his transfiguration, Jesus was revealed in all his glory to those he loved most deeply, his three closest friends. (Remember, that includes Peter, who had recently been called *Satan* and would shortly deny he even *knew* Jesus.)

Remember the *context* of the Transfiguration. It falls between the first two predictions Jesus gives of his suffering and death to come. While the disciples would have preferred the *glory*—and after all, wouldn't we?—what lay in store for them all was persecution, and the arrest, suffering, and crucifixion of the Lord they loved so dearly.

Christian theologian Juergen Moltmann wrote at length about the difference between “the Christ of glory”—whom we see today revealed in the Transfiguration—and “the Christ of the cross,” who was put to death on the Roman instrument of torture, the cross. He *was* raised to eternal life by the glory of his Father (and ours), and his resurrection is indeed glorious.

But for Christians who desire to follow Jesus, to walk in his ways, and do his will, the glory we most desire isn't the approval of the world, or what some might call a *successful* life. Our joy is in living out his undying love, which calls us to **do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, and to love all people as Jesus has loved us.**

Thanks be to God!