

“TRANSFIGURATION AND ALL THAT JAZZ”

Matthew 17:1-9

Two friends were visiting with each other when the host said to his friend: “Would you like some rice with hashbasha? So instead of asking about the hashbasha, the friend responded by asking: What is rice? So this morning, with the sermon title “Transfiguration and All That Jazz!” I hope that you are asking “what is Transfiguration?” and not what is jazz? Transfiguration is an important feast in the Christian year for Eastern Christians and Catholics. However, it is still a new thing for many Western Christians. It is a little too mysterious for us to deal with. We like logical stories and this one is certainly about something that is not. Growing up in Syria, I remember celebrating Transfiguration on August 6th through worship with my Orthodox friends and through fire crackers afterwards.

Although not well-known in the West, today’s story from Matthew 17 is a very important part of our Christian story. It is a hard story to deal with, but nonetheless a very important one. This was a turning point for Jesus’ ministry from Galilee to Jerusalem where he would face the cross. Matthew highlights a magnificent experience which Jesus told his disciples to keep secret until his resurrection. You’d think that he would want them to share this experience of transformation with others, but it was the opposite: It would have been too scary and even confusing. Jesus and three of his disciples went up to a mountain. And suddenly a major transformation took place in his life that was not only an inner change, but was also something that the disciples were able to see physically. His face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. He was basically transfigured. He was also accompanied by two important figures from Israel’s faith traditions: Moses and Elijah. So what happened? Even the disciples seemed not to be able to understand. Many biblical scholars have attempted to explain this mysterious event. Some say that it was just a vision not a reality. Others say it was a later appearance of Jesus after he was resurrected and it got inserted into this part of the Gospel. Yet, others go with this as a symbolic event not a real one because Matthew was trying to prove that Jesus was the Messiah and he wanted him to be like Moses going up a mountain and having a mystical experience. Others simplify the story to mean that Jesus was showing the disciples his divine nature as if Jesus really needed to flaunt that. No wonder this has been an overlooked story in the Western tradition where we value reason and factual knowledge a great deal. This story is a little too ambiguous for our thinking minds. So how do we deal with this story? What possible value can it have for us today when we can never prove transformation events like this one?

To begin looking at the meaning of Transfiguration, I would like us to pay attention to the context of the story. Jesus was with a few of his disciples on a mountain. A lot of special events happen in the Bible on mountains. For the people of Israel, mountains were believed to be places where God dwells and where true worship can happen. Moses certainly encountered God in the burning bush on a mountain. The Ten Commandments were received on a mountain. The most important sermon Jesus gave was delivered on a mountain. So, when we hear about Jesus and the disciples going up a mountain, we know that this was a time of prayer and worship. This was a special time when Jesus was seeking in a very intentional way to be open to the mystery of God in his life. Through prayer Jesus was being fully present to God, seeking that deeper connection with the Holy Spirit. As a result Jesus was glowing with the presence of God’s Spirit. God’s presence dwelt in Jesus in such a way that even his physical appearance was transformed. We are not told that the disciples tried to explain the experience and to figure out if Jesus was human and divine. In fact, through Peter’s response we know that they really didn’t understand the experience in their heads. They were there as pure witnesses to the power of God’s presence in Jesus Christ. They were witnesses to the core meaning of the life of Jesus: his deep and mysterious connection with God that will help lead him on his way to the cross. After the transfiguration story we learn that this was also a transformation story of the ministry of Jesus from journeying in Galilee to heading to Jerusalem to the cross. This transformation experience comes at a time when Jesus faces his own death. So only through this deep experience of communion with God would he be able to face the pain of his death. Only when Jesus could really touch the depth of the Spirit in his life would he be able to walk through the valley of death. Only when Jesus was at the heart of God’s love, would he be able to face death. Jesus’ transformation was not about building a Christian empire or having more power on earth. He was being transformed in order to be of great service to the world.

So if I ask you today if you would like Transfiguration today, you may be wondering if this could happen to you? How many of us can really tell when we see someone get changed physically like Jesus did? We long for

that kind of transformation, but it does not seem to happen like that in real life, at least not very often. Only in movies do we see such transformation. How about real life when we don't normally see a Transfiguration or a bolt of lightning transforming people? I think the key to this journey of transformation is allowing God to do it for us. Often times we try so hard to be transformed as if it is a spiritual prize. We tend to forget that true transformation is the work of the Spirit. It also does not happen the same way for everyone. Jesus was transformed and transfigured in the darkness and mystery of a holy place and a holy time of prayer. No magic tricks or superior spiritual maturity can do the job. **Only our communion with God in prayer can bring transformation to our lives.** This is not just about being moral, joining the church, believing certain doctrines, knowing the scriptures by heart, or reading the right books. It is about the reality of your Soul. Where does your soul live? Is your soul centered in the presence of God? That is the key to our transformation: spending time in communion with God.

In Eastern Europe, there was a Jewish couple whose ten-year-old son did not want to study the Torah. This was a terrible problem. What their little boy wanted to do was to be out running in the fields, roaming the woods and discovering the ways of animals. But everyone knows that Torah is the key to happiness. Not only that, all the other little boys were studying Torah; so why shouldn't their son? The unhappy parents went to the Rabbi. Obediently, they took his advice; but the little boy still refused to study the Law. In fact, where he had once been merely bored, he now became defiant. They followed everyone's advice in turn: the best of it had no effect, and the worst made their son resist and distrust them more than ever. They began to despair. Just then, word came that the greatest Hassidic rabbi of their generation, Aaron of Karlin, was going to visit their little village. On the day that Aaron of Karlin came to their village, a long line of people waited for his blessing: the childless, the crippled, those who had failed in business, and there among them was our couple, and their ten-year-old boy. When at last they were ushered into the great rabbi's presence, they told him the whole story. The rabbi sternly looked at them and said "So -- he won't study Torah, will he?" "You leave him here with me for two hours. I'll give him a talking to that he'll never forget!" The parents looked at each other in fear. Should they leave their little boy with such a fierce man? But the advice of everyone else had already failed. He was their last chance. As soon as the parents had left, the great rabbi went up to the little boy. Slowly, tenderly, he put his arms around the boy. The boy was stiff at first, but then, by degrees, he allowed himself to be hugged. He was finally pulled against the breast of the great man. He stood there, hearing the rabbi's heart beat. Their breath flowed in and out together. When the parents returned after two hours, they said, "Did it work?" "Did it work?" He was nearly shouting. "You just wait and see!" All the way home, the parents were looking at their little boy. Was there any change? Could there be any change? They stopped at the butcher's. The butcher slapped a piece of meat on the counter. "Mama, the butcher is angry, isn't he?" "Oh, I guess he is." "Mama, what happened to him - to make him feel that way?" Over the days that followed, the parents realized: their little boy was somehow more in touch with people, attuned to their feelings, interested in their stories. When he heard others discussing the Torah that week, he suddenly realized: these were stories of people! He became fascinated with them. What made the people act that way? Within a month, he asked to be allowed to learn to read the stories for himself. Within a year, his teachers saw him as their most talented student. In one way after another, the fire of the Talmudic tradition began to glow brightly inside him. Before long, adult villagers were bringing their quarrels to the boy! He would point out to them the solutions that had been there in their hearts, but that they -- over the roar of their fear and anger -- could not hear. When it was time for the boy to choose a profession, what else could he do? He became a rabbi himself. Years later, when he was known as the greatest rabbi of his generation, his disciples would sit around him and ask: "You are such a great scholar. How did you get your deep insight into the Torah?" And he would say to them, "When did I learn to study Torah? When did I truly learn to study the holy Torah? I learned everything when the great rabbi, Aaron of Karlin, held me silently against his heart."

As we all come to the communion table this morning, may we allow ourselves to be hugged by God, to stand silently held against God's own heart to be in that place of deep communion with God to be transformed by God's love and Spirit. Come join the mystery of this feast not just as another way to be good, but as a way to be fully present with God in the community of faith. It is only when we experience this deep communion with God that we become empowered to work for justice in the world and not for wealth, share love and not hatred, seek peace and not war, seek the commonwealth of the community and not the privileged few, walk the journey of pain and not hide from helping others. Come to this table to live as a child of God and to be renewed and transformed through the mystery of God's own heartbeat.