

A Dazzling Transfiguration *Matthew 17: 1-9*

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Today is Transfiguration Sunday. This is the last Sunday before Lent. It is the tradition of the church to read the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, our Gospel reading for today.

This is a fabulous story. Scripture tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. When they were up there, Jesus was transfigured before them – his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Then, suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared and started talking to Jesus. Stunned by this, Peter asked Jesus if he could build three dwelling places on the mountain top – one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus. While Peter was talking to Jesus, a bright cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud came a voice that said: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus touched them and told them to get up and not be afraid. When they looked up, everyone had gone and only Jesus remained. Then, when they were walking down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man had been raised from the dead.

What a dazzling story! Throughout Jesus’ ministry people were trying to figure out his identity. Who was Jesus, really? It was clear he was a Holy man. He was a healer **and** a miracle worker **and** a teacher of wisdom **and** a social prophet **and** a movement leader **and** a Rabbi. Who was Jesus, really? Our scripture makes it very clear – Jesus is God’s beloved Son who hangs out with two of the greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah. He is transfigured in light – He is the light of the world.

This idea of transformation in Christ was commonly understood by the early followers. They were known as People of The Way. They knew that to follow in the Way of Christ meant to have a change of heart, or a conversion. It is the shift from seeing life through the lens of self-centered orientation to seeing life through the lens of a God-centered orientation. Conversion, transformation, is not a one-time event but a life-long process of paying attention to the things that Christ cared about.

Sometimes conversions are mountain top experiences that are so profound our way of seeing and understanding life completely shifts.

Over these past few weeks, we’ve been studying the Christian writer Frederick Buechner in the Awakening the Spirit book group on Mondays at noon. In addition to novels and theological books, over the years Buechner has written a number of spiritual autobiographies reflecting on his life and his faith. In them he tells the story of his conversion – his transfiguration.

When Buechner was ten years old, his father, who was an alcoholic, committed suicide. One Saturday morning in 1936, when Buechner was playing a game with his younger brother in his bedroom, his father looked in on them. Then he went down the garage, turned on the car and sat on the running board until he died. The family were atheists so there was no funeral or burial. Instead, his mother and grandmother packed up the boys, moved to Bermuda and never spoke of his father again. The silence was confusing and heartbreaking.

Some time in his late '20's when he was living in New York City, Buechner started to attend Park Avenue Presbyterian Church because the senior minister was a renowned preacher. One day the preacher explained that one of the ways God communicates with all of us is through laughter. For some reason, at that moment, Buechner's heart was touched and he found himself weeping in church, amazed by himself and his change of heart. God suddenly seemed real. This conversion led him to seminary and ordination and then to become a full-time writer about The Way of Christ.

However, in mid-life, he found himself facing another crisis when his oldest daughter became anorexic and deathly ill. He realized that he'd never really dealt with his own father's alcoholic issues or the silence around his father's death and it had affected his daughter's life. One day while driving near his home in Vermont, he noticed his thoughts were deeply troubled. He pulled over to the side of the road to be still and reflect. Heartbroken, worried and stressed, he sat in his car and waited. As he sat there in turmoil, a car drove by with a license plate that said: TRUST. Buechner writes that it was exactly the word he needed to know. He was not alone. God was there to be his guide.

To let go and trust – really trust God – is deeply transfiguring. It shifts our anxiety, our fears and our troubles to a place of rest. We suddenly understand that by some mysterious way, God will show us The Way. To really trust in God shifts us from a heart of darkness to a place of light – a place of truth.

Not all conversion are mountain top experiences. In fact, they happen every day if we pay attention to the movement of the Spirit in our lives and how the light of God touches each of us.

I was with a minister the other day from another state. He has a large church with lots of responsibility. Throughout his ministry, he has always loved working on justice issues but now he finds that the administration of the church takes up so much of his time that he doesn't have the time to do what he loves. As he was talking, he looked tired and dull and he wondered about his energy for ministry. Then there was a moment when everything shifted. He started to talk about a new initiative in his community where a college wanted to use its resources and interns to help work on a program for gun control in his city. They needed his help. As he was telling me about this, his whole demeanor changed. His eyes lit up and his face became radiant. His voice was filled with passion and his mind and soul were united in knowing that this was work he loved to do. He was transfigured – a shining light of truth radiated from him.

As we follow the Way of Jesus – as we listen to him – we discover our own inner passion to be about peace, or justice, or compassion, or kindness, or generosity, or gratitude. These are the gifts of the Spirit – the Way of God. When we settle into them day after day, we find ourselves transfigured – our hearts are changed. Our light is touched by God’s light and shines in the world.

Each morning during my time of prayer and meditation I pray this prayer that I’ve adapted from the Iona Abbey prayer for healing:

Spirit of the Living God
present with us now
enter me body, mind and spirit
and guide me in Your Way of being.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.

I also pray it for each of you:

Spirit of the Living God
present with us now
enter you body, mind and spirit
and guide you in God’s Way of being.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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