



THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

March 2, 2003

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration is a dangerous day in the liturgical calendar of the church. We trot out the white and gold paraments, we sing hymns filled with images of light and glory. The presider is decked out in high holiday vestments. It looks for all the world like a festival of triumph—and of course it is. But with any festival of triumph comes the greatest of temptations—and here in the transfiguration, Simon Peter expertly shows us exactly what this temptation looks like.

The whole transfiguration narrative begins six days prior to the Transfiguration itself. Six days earlier, Peter has been told, quite literally, to shut the hell up. It all started when Jesus began to talk about the cross—about his betrayal, his suffering, his death. Peter and the disciples have been told that the Human One must suffer many things—that the Human One will be rejected by the religious authorities and will be killed and after three days rise again. But Peter will have none of it. This is not why Peter signed up for this discipleship gig. And so Jesus cusses him out—though it loses quite a lot when it gets translated into the English, “Get behind me Satan!”

And then Jesus tells all his followers that they too will take up the cross, that they too will lose themselves for the sake of others.

So now 6 days later Peter and the boys are with Jesus on the mountain top. And something happens. Jesus is somehow – changed. He is metamorphosed as the Greek of the New Testament says—or as one translator suggests, Jesus is remodeled. And there with him are Moses and Elijah—risen—or something—from the dead. Peter can hardly contain himself—this is what it’s all about!! Shining glory. Let’s build us some shrines to preserve the moment, This wondrous vision proves to Peter that the cross and dying stuff was all a mistake—this is what Peter wants for a Messiah: a wonder-worker, a healer, clad in robes of shining, white glory, safely preserved with Moses and Elijah in mountain top shrines.

In a recent interview, Kenneth Woodward, Newsweek magazine’s chief religion writer and editor, describes some current trends in the American church. One such trend is for churches to do market surveys to find out what people want—and then they strive to give it to them. These surveys have discovered that people want churches with recreational facilities and athletic programs for the kids. They want big parking lots. They don’t want the liturgies to be too long. They want short sermons that stay away from depressing topics like disease, poverty, injustice and homelessness. And some people want condensed Bibles with simplified language so that everyone can immediately understand them. And that’s just what churches that want to grow give them.

I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of Jesus, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don’t want enough of Christ to make me love a person of a different race, to pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal to go. I would like to buy \$3.00 worth

of God please.

Oh Peter, shut up and listen to Jesus, God's beloved and anointed one. Yes, you have seen glory here. You have seen Moses and Elijah risen—somehow risen—from the dead. And you have seen Jesus shining brighter than any brightness you have ever beheld on earth.

But this transfiguration—it is only the beginning, the beginning of the journey to the cross. And yes, this beginning tells of the ending as well. But you won't understand what any of this means until the Human One is risen from the dead.

Jesus is indeed transfigured—changed on the mountaintop. But the transfigured Jesus that comes down from the mountaintop is an increasingly difficult Jesus—the transfigured Jesus is the who speaks in contradictions—who talks about needing to die in order to live. The transfigured Jesus who comes down from the mountaintop says that only by becoming a servant can one take one's place in the realm of God, only by being last will one be first. The Jesus who comes down from the mountain is increasingly irritated that the disciples can't seem to get it through their thick heads that it is only at the cross where they will see the fullness of Jesus. The transfigured Jesus no longer tries to placate the religious authorities—rather, he acts up, violently disrupting church business as usual. There will be no market-driven gimmicks, gymnasiums, or big parking lots to bring the people in and make the church grow.

And now the church leaders are looking for a way to kill him. Make Jesus blonde, blue-eyed, sweet, and innocuous—that's as good a way as any to kill him. Keep those crosses gold and do not, by any means put the broken body of Christ on them—empty and pretty crosses will keep the world safely away from the transfigured Jesus who comes down from the mountain.

And so pretty processions and triumphant hymns are the temptation of the Feast of the Transfiguration—or of any feast that forgets the way of the cross. Yes, we do remember and celebrate Jesus' transfiguration.

And, since every story of Jesus is a story that implicates us the baptized, this transfiguration story is about us too. With our baptism into Christ, we too have been transfigured—we too now shine in the white of resurrection—we have been promised that we too like Christ shall triumph over death. And while that is our end, it is also what sets us on the road to the cross—following the suffering servant wherever we are led—called forward into lives of self-sacrifice for the sake of the neighbor.

Lest we forget the way of the cross, lest we forget that we have been transfigured for lives of sacrificial service to the neighbor, the Church, guided one hopes by the Spirit, provides us with some reminders. At the close of this liturgy (at the close of the 11.00 liturgy), we will take down the gold and white alleluia banner. We will strip the communion table of its shout of triumph, and these signs of glory will be entombed behind the communion table. And the gold of the chancel cross will be draped in black as we prepare for Ash Wednesday, one of the most solemn days of the church year.

And so now we sing yet one more song of glory and triumph. It sings of our end, it sings of our beginning. But it can make no sense unless we follow our Lord Jesus Christ to the cross—his cross—our cross.