

Transfiguration Sunday
February 11, 2018
Mark 2:2-9

REFORMED AND TRANSFORMED

In addition to this being Scout Sunday here at Fellowship, it is also a specially marked Sunday on the church calendar called Transfiguration Sunday. The last Sunday before Lent begins, we always read the story of Jesus taking Peter, James and John up to the top of a mountain. It's a pretty strange story. There is very little consensus among Biblical scholars about the historical tradition, the original context, or even the substance of the message revealed in this story. Seriously, the whole story has had everyone from the most respected theologians to the casual, first time reader scratching their heads. So just a-heads up especially for our visitors. We wouldn't want you to think Presbyterians just randomly pick some weird Scripture passages for Sunday mornings.

Sometimes people who are not Christians or who have lived their entire life going to one church, ask me what is the difference between Presbyterians and say Baptists or Methodists or Episcopalians. These are usually people who are just curious and really are not looking for a lecture on the Protestant Reformation and how it came about that there are so many different denominations. So, I usually just say not much.

I'm guessing no one here wants to hear an hour-long lecture on how the Reformation resulted in so many different Christian denominations and now non-denominations. I will say that one thing that is not unique to Presbyterians but is emphasized maybe more than some of the other traditions, is that we embrace the intellectual aspects of claiming God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. We are encouraged to question our faith. In fact, we believe it is required of us. God gave us the most developed brains in all of creation and he expects us to use them.

We are wary of too much casual attribution to the Spiritual. As one of my colleagues in ministry once put it, you don't want to just go around all woo woo about the spiritual—you better be careful what you ask for when you call out the Holy Spirit

So this story, about the transfiguration of Christ, presents a problem for us. I mean you can't get around it. Something seriously spiritual is going on here. Something seriously not of the material world is happening. It's a mystery and it's important. Just another heads up, we are not going to solve this mystery. But maybe we can hear God's voice, feel the Spirit's presence and encounter Jesus anyway.

Some people who are educated and practical are not too concerned with thinking about the mysteries of the faith, or even what that phrase means. We can live a good Christian life understanding that Jesus was an extraordinary teacher and prophet whose words still inform our personal ethical and moral standards and just not worry about whether the resurrection happened. Some of us might be comfortable acknowledging Jesus Christ as the Savior who rose from the grave, but don't want to think about it too hard because we're afraid it might lead to unbelief—a loss of faith. And some faith traditions actually teach that questioning, having doubts, is sinful in itself.

It is ironic that to a great extent, these ways of thinking are rooted in our Puritan heritage. The Puritans mastered the art of a serious, empirically-oriented, no-nonsense Christian world view. Those deeply religious, earliest European-American settlers were people who believed in study, hard work, and self-sufficiency. They also thought they had gotten it all figured out and there was no place for questioning. Their values influenced the rugged individualism that marked the pioneering spirit for the next 200 years or so and led to the emergence of the United States as a world power.

To some extent, this “I can make it on my own” attitude that is so very American probably is also genetic. I heard a scientist interviewed on NPR say that we all have a genetic disposition toward an over-inflated sense of self-confidence—an over inflated ego. People naturally have a higher opinion of their own abilities than any objective criteria could support because we evolved that way. Now, he did say this egotistical streak is more pervasive in men than women, but we all have it to some degree.

Think about it. It takes an irrationally egotistical sense of self-confidence to think you can go up against a saber-tooth tiger holding nothing but an arrowhead tied to the end of a stick and wearing nothing but a loin cloth. Those who did and survived passed down that irrational “I can do anything on my own” gene.

So whether we are talking about making decisions on how we are going to meet our basic human needs for food and shelter, or how we are going to approach our understanding of our God who has revealed Godself in the Bible, we tend to think we can do it on our own. We don’t need high falutin theologians and we don’t need a church.

When it comes to the transfiguration of Jesus at least, we probably should take the middle ground. Rather than think about it too hard, maybe we should just let it work on us.

Up on the mountain, Jesus is dazzling, Moses and Elijah, both dead for centuries appear, everything is so brilliant and ethereal. James and John and Peter are overcome by what they are experiencing. It is the proverbial, original mountaintop experience. They are so moved by it, they want to build themselves a shelter so they can just stay there. Then they hear a voice from the cloud.

It harkens back to Jesus’ baptism. Remember, Jesus was praying, he was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the voice from the heavens said

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." [3:22]. This time the voice from heaven says: **This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him."**

Even though I have heard Dale White tell his story and describe his ministry before, his talk at the senior's luncheon on Tuesday, was riveting and inspiring. Dale is a convicted felon and recovering alcoholic who, after years and years of one failed attempt at rehab after another was transformed when he finally encountered Jesus. It wasn't an intellectual decision on his part, he just finally realized he couldn't do it on his own. Now he has spent years and years ministering to recently released prisoners. Helping them reintegrate into society and access the resources they need to enable transformation themselves so that they don't return to prison. It is a calling that is totally consuming. Dale gives all the credit to God and to his church. Still, Dale acknowledges that yes, there are time when he struggles to keep it up, when he experiences feelings of unbelief, like everyone does sometimes. Still, he holds on to his faith and it is his faith, doubts and all, that keeps him going.

Don't analyze it too much. Don't stress if you have feelings of unbelief. Listen to Jesus and as he was transfigured, you will be transformed.