

The Price of Transfiguration

First UMC of Pocatello

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John 11:1-3, 17-44

Today, Christians all over the world are gathering in their places of worship to hear and reflect upon the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration. The story itself comes from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and it goes something like this:

Once, during his Galilean ministry, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him up to a mountaintop for a time of silence and prayer. As they were praying, Jesus began to shine – his face, his clothes, his skin. A bright and brilliant light, radiating, it seemed, from inside his body, enveloped the whole scene. Into that light, Moses and Elijah, the famous prophets of Israel, appeared; they talked with Jesus.

After a while, a dark cloud, the cloud of God's glory, descended upon the mountain, overshadowed them all. A voice boomed out from the cloud, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him" (Luke 9:35), words strikingly similar to those proclaimed by heaven at Jesus' baptism. Suddenly, the cloud lifted, the light faded, the prophets disappeared; stunned, the disciples beheld the "ordinary" Jesus. But their perception of him was forever changed.

With this story of light flashing forth from Jesus' body, a hopeful, artistic, poetic sensibility took root in Christian spirituality. All of creation aflame with the glory of God, like a bush that burns but is not consumed. Jesus gives us eyes to see it. One of the ancient church fathers, St. Irenaeus, famously wrote, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." You write something like because of moments like

the Transfiguration, moments when the light, the energy, the mysterious wholeness in all things is perceived. To grow more aware of and permeable to this light is what the Eastern Orthodox Christians call divinization, what Methodists call sanctification, what mystics of all stripes call union with God.

Hmm. As war rages in Eastern Europe, as the lust for power and the compulsive need for vengeance have set the military might of Russia against the young and fragile democracy of Ukraine, we must wonder yet again – certainly not for the first time – how Transfiguration can be possible. How can we human creatures be full of the light and the glory of God when we know how cruel we so often are to one another, how callously we look upon suffering, how addicted we are to war? *Fully* alive, Irenaeus? It is all we can do – and so often we cannot and do not do it – to keep one another *biologically* alive, to hold back the bombs and bullets. To claim that Transfiguration is possible for us, for the world – is it faith or folly?

John's Gospel does not include the Transfiguration story. Instead, as we've seen, John wrote what he called a book of signs (20:30-31). His story is a compilation of small, everyday acts when Jesus pulled back the veil to reveal the presence of God dwelling in all things.

For this reason, many have argued that John knew about the Transfiguration story and wrote his own Gospel as one long extended interpretation of it, as if he had taken a clipping from Christ's life and propagated a whole new form of the story from it. Rather than a one-off event, John is suggesting that Transfiguration is simply what Jesus does wherever he goes. He performs signs in the presence of his disciples, the ones who have answered his invitation to come and see.

The climactic sign of John's Gospel is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Those famous words, spoken at every Christian funeral and

graveside service – “I am the resurrection and the life” – originate here, this moment when Jesus weeps while standing among his weeping friends at the tomb their brother. I think this crowning moment in the life of Christ might help us to bridge that dark gulf we see and feel between the possibility of a glorified creation and the reality of our wounded and wounding world. The bridge – and this is critical – the bridge issues forth from the heart of a person in pain.

Jesus arrived at the town of Bethany much too late. Lazarus had been dead for four days. At the time, the Jewish people believed that a person’s spirit would hover near the deceased body for up to three days. That window had closed. Lazarus was gone forever. His body had been placed in the tomb, and the rituals of grief were underway.

But Jesus does come. And news of his coming brings first Martha and then Mary out to talk with him. They each, in turn, accuse him of failing to make a difference in their brother’s condition when they know that he could have.

Remarkably, Martha expresses her abiding trust in Jesus as the Messiah even though the situation at hand suggests otherwise. It is to her that Jesus speaks those famous funeral words quoted above.

Mary, however, isn’t so easily comforted. She accuses Jesus of failing her and then weeps openly in his presence. At his moment, something deep and tectonic begins to shift inside the heart of the Savior. “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11:33). Agitated. Angry. Thrown off balance. Drawn into the world as seen through the others’ tears. In response to this gut-wrenching feeling, he asks where Lazarus has been laid.

Friends, the meaning of it all, the present possibility of Transfiguration, hinges on Mary's answer.

Turning to Jesus with wet, gleaming, burning eyes, she says to him, "Come and see."

Come and see.

Come. See.

These are Jesus' own words from earlier in the Gospel. With them, he called his disciples to join him. Disciples are those who *go and see*. His words, by turns playful and haunting, hang over all our lives as if to say: "To find out what you're looking for, come and see. You can't learn about who I am from a distance. If you desire the fullness of life, if you long to see signs of God's glory revealed, then you have to come and embark on the journey itself."

Now Mary has thrown these words, and all that they imply, right back at Jesus. It is as if she has said:

"Jesus, *you've* got to come and see this for *yourself*. You can't know what I'm going through from a distance, Jesus. You've got to walk right up to it with me. You've got to stand before the tomb of my brother. Before you ask me to trust you, before you tell me to roll the stone away so that you can work your miracle, I need you to stand here and smell this stench of death. You've got to have your belly twisted in a knot. You've got to cry. Can you – will you – see what I see, feel what I feel, know what I know?"

At the sound of his own words, his own invitation to divine life, appropriated and redirected by Mary, demanding that *he* come to see the site of human death, Jesus is undone. He weeps (11:34). He weeps.

He weeps because coming and seeing must work both ways. Just as there is no other way for us to truly know him but to be with him, there is no other way for him to truly know us than to be with us – fully, completely, in and through all things. Here, with tears flowing down from a face both human and divine, we can sense with Jesus the presence of the cross waiting just beyond the horizon.

None of us reach maturity in our faith without, at some point, coming alongside Mary to raise Jesus' opening wager, to say, "Come and see" and push him all in, force him to either fold or reveal that he holds the one thing that can save us.

It is the risk of a lifetime. Yet, it is our only path to Transfiguration. Only because Jesus has borne our infirmities and diseases, carried our burdens, taken our stripes, gone with us into the depths of sorrow, and returned scarred but nevertheless alive – only because he is truly with us can we begin to trust that there is some bright and hopeful presence stirring behind the thing we call "reality."

Disciples bring Jesus to what he needs to see. We are called to stand in places of hurt, in hurting places, and cry out to God, "Come and see." With feet firmly planted, with tears flowing down, we have the power to move heaven and earth because God has swung wide the gates of the divine heart to us. What pierces ours pierces God's. In the heart of Jesus Christ, God has chosen to give us complete, undeviating attention. So, where we feel and direct our sorrow, the sorrow of God, and therefore the power of God, follows. Our attention draws God's. "Come and see."

The twentieth-century French philosopher Simone Weil once said, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. ... Attention, taken to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer." Etymologically, the

word attention means *to stretch*. Sometimes, to pay attention to someone or something, you have to stretch body, mind, heart, time, imagination – get outside your comfort zone, limber up, change.

We stretch toward God. God stretches toward us.

We must stretch toward Ukraine today in our praying and feeling, our concern and our learning. We must stretch there and demand that God come and meet us and bring about Transfiguration. We must stretch to every hurting place that reeks of death and say to Jesus, “Come and see.”

Jesus came, still comes.

Jesus saw, still sees.

Jesus wept, still weeps.

Faith is not comfortable, not escapist, not a glossy lacquer over life.

Faith is an act of eyes-wide-open showing up. Ours. Gods.

Amen.