

## Transfiguration

I have always found the Transfiguration awfully hard to preach on. The layers of biblical history and theology can make for interesting reading if you're a Bible nerd, but it can be tricky to preach without getting lost in Old Testament weeds.

This year I'm finding it helpful to place the story in the bigger story of the gospel. First, as a reminder, we are backtracking this week. In our schedule of just reading through Luke, we would have read this several weeks ago.

But I wanted to do this story on the proper day – just as we get ready to dive into Lent.

The word transfiguration in Greek is metamorphosis. If you're into science, metamorphosis is what butterflies do when they change from caterpillars into butterflies – they change completely.

In this moment of transfiguration, Jesus changes completely. The disciples are understandably confused. Like what the heck. But the story doesn't just stop with his change in appearance. We also get this overshadowing cloud and a voice that comes out of that cloud.

Let's take a look at this cloud...the overshadowing presence of God. This isn't the first overshadowing event in the gospel story.

At the beginning of Luke's gospel an angel appears to Mary. The angel announces Jesus' birth, and says "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

In that overshadowing of God's spirit and power, things change forever for Mary. She goes from being an ordinary Jewish peasant girl to the mother of the incarnate God.

Then, at Jesus' baptism a scene that is at least in part echoed here plays out. "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; [\[C\]](#) with you I am well pleased."

At Jesus' baptism God's presence again overshadows Jesus and the people. In this scene, Jesus is anointed and prepared for his ministry. The event sets the course for the rest of Jesus' life. It's another turning point in the story.

Then, we see this transfiguration scene play out. This too is a turning point. From here on out, Jesus' course shifts. Prior to this his preaching tour had him mainly in Galilee. From here, he will descend from the mountain top and back in to the muck of the world.

And his course will shift – he will set his face toward Jerusalem...he will walk into the teeth of a power machine that ultimately will kill him.

But then, although we don't really see it, the power of God will again overshadow him as he lays in the cold tomb. And that power will raise him from the dead. And in that overshadowing, the course of the whole world shifts.

The evil that nailed Jesus to a cross is overcome. The sin of the world that lusts after power is overcome. The sin of the world that is willing to sacrifice an innocent victim is overcome. Death...is overcome.

When God overshadows, the course of history changes. Jesus is transfigured before his disciples. Their response shows they don't exactly get it just yet, but they too will be changed forever by the turn towards Jerusalem that happens here.

But the turn in the story that happens when God overshadows is not without opposition. After Jesus' birth, when he is taken as an infant to the Temple, the prophet Simeon held the baby in his arms and said this: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

After God overshadows Jesus at his baptism, the Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, we see him opposed by Satan who tries to get him to change sides.

Now, here, immediately after God's overshadowing announcement, Jesus descends and meets the opposition...in a boy whose life has been hijacked by an evil spirit.

And then of course from here, Jesus walks into the opposition...a collusion of religion and empire, backed by Satan, that will not stop until he is dead.

But the opposition that meets Jesus doesn't win. In the wilderness after his baptism, Satan does not succeed in his efforts to tempt Jesus.

When he comes down from the mountaintop, Jesus defeats the spirit who has deprived the boy of full life. The boy himself is transfigured – is changed. The face that was contorted and covered with foam is transfigured into a whole, healthy child.

And then, again, in the tomb in which Jesus lay, it appeared death had won. But in a sense transfiguration happened again. Jesus was transfigured from a corpse, wrapped in grave cloths,

to fully alive. Even death is a power that is not equal to the task of a God who transfigures, a God who brings the dead to life.

Transfiguration has a powerful theological message. It reveals Christ's divine nature. It gives us a foretaste of Christ's glory.

But what comes after it shows us what glory looks like with boots on the ground. And that makes all the difference for us. Glory isn't just the shining appearance of Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah. Glory is going back down into the messiness of human life. Jesus turns from that mountaintop glory back into a world of suffering to bring healing.

Jesus turns from the glory of the mountaintop into a path that will lead to his death. Which leads to a whole new kind of glory.

What comes after the glory of the mountaintop is a vision of how misguided we humans can be when we think that basking in Jesus' glory will somehow make us great.

In contrast, Jesus shows us a glory that is humble...that heals. That brings the dead to life.

It is that glory that brings us hope. Hope that in our own struggles against whatever demons have hold of us, Jesus will win. Hope that a world torn apart by arrogance and hate can be healed. Hope that where death seems bound to win, Jesus brings life.

Wednesday we enter the season of Lent. Lent is a season of honesty...a season in which we look at ourselves and admit that we have too often given in to our own self-interest. It's a season in which we face the despair that threatens to steal full life from us. It's a season in which we confront the reality of death.

But here, we get a vision of what's to come...a vision that assures us that in the end, Christ conquers evil and even death.

Like the disciples, we are asked to follow Jesus in his turn towards Jerusalem. We too are called to follow into the teeth of all those powers that oppose God. We too are going to be met with opposition...an opposition that tries to get us to follow the Rome way instead of the Jesus way.

But we too find reassurance and strength by this image of Jesus...by the overshadowing power of God, who in the end defeats all the opposition.