

The Transfiguration of Jesus 2/26/17 Exodus 24:12-18, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

Metamorphosis into Christ Nature: A Sermon for the Transfiguration of Jesus

Just imagine being with Peter, James, and John coming down that mountain with Jesus. You're probably thinking about the extraordinary thing you've just witnessed. Your friend Jesus had suddenly started to glow – literally. Then you saw him talking with Moses and Elijah, the two biggest names in Jewish tradition. Never mind they're long dead. This was epic! And then, to top it off, the voice of God came from the clouds! Like the other disciples you fell down on the ground scared out of your wits, until Jesus came over and told you to get up. I imagine when he said, "Don't be afraid," you all thought to yourselves "Yeah, right." But you did get up and headed down the mountain with Jesus, thinking, "Wait till I tell my friends about this!" Except Jesus says, "Don't tell anyone about this just yet." Imagine keeping something like this under your hat.

It is hard to imagine being there. It's hard enough for us to read about and try to figure out what that was all about. People have been arguing about that for millennia. The story of the transfiguration or metamorphosis of Jesus appears in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), so it would appear to be a pretty important story to those early writers. But it's also a story that raises a lot of questions. What are we reading here? A fable, a myth, a theological metaphor? Eyewitness history?

Of course, some simply dismiss this story as bizarre fiction. They did that from the beginning. Tacitus, considered one of the greatest historians of the Roman empire, sneered at the "pernicious superstitions" of believers. Suetonius, in his *Life of Nero*, derided Christians as those "adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition." What we see in the second reading is the author of 2 Peter (speaking as Peter) recounting the experience to rebut criticisms that the early believers followed "cleverly invented stories."

So what really happened? No one knows for sure. But using the "criterion of embarrassment," which says that if part of a story puts Jesus or the disciples in a bad light it's not likely to have been either invented or airbrushed, there just might be some truth to this crazy tale. I mean Peter comes off as a dunce in the story. Unflattering details like this suggest that the gospel writers were writing history, even if the story, like so many stories in the Bible, is easier to describe than to explain.

Let me tell you what I think. I think something did happen, and Jesus was literally if briefly "metamorphosed" before their eyes. The disciples saw the human Jesus – itinerant rabbi, wisdom teacher, rabble-rouser, boundary-crosser – suddenly also take on his divine nature. He became Jesus the Christ; you could say he took on Christ Nature. But here's the thing: I don't believe that those two natures are mutually exclusive. Jesus didn't cast off his humanity in order to put on the divine. Nor did he then take off his glitzy divinity

clothes and put his ordinary human clothes back on.

I think Jesus always had those two natures within him, and for a few shining moments, the disciples were able to get a glimpse of what the fullness of humanity looks like. Some say that this is an out of place post-resurrection appearance. But I don't believe that it took dying and rising for Jesus to manifest his true nature.

Moreover, I don't believe that Jesus was the only one with Christ Nature. I think we all have it. Now I don't expect to start glowing like Jesus did any time soon, but that doesn't mean I don't have that potential within me. And so do you. The divine is within, and with it is the possibility of exuding your Christ Nature at any time. Try this: take your own name and put Christ after it (remember Christ was not Jesus' last name!) Sounds blasphemous, doesn't it? Yet when we take away the dualism of heaven/earth and human/divine, and we see Jesus as the epitome of what it is to be human – that is to carry within us the presence of the divine – then we begin to see ourselves as Christ bearers to the world. We don't have to wait until we die to be transfigured, metamorphosed into insert your name Christ.

It may not happen often, but when it does, others can get a glimpse of what it means to be truly human. I say that it may not happen often – it may not happen ever happen – because this transformation takes a tremendously God-centered soul. Most of us are pretty far from the spiritual maturity of Jesus, and to get there requires the willingness to die to the self, the ego which we cherish so much.

I want to say something about this spiritual process. The word 'transfiguration' comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word 'metamorphosis.' We often think of metamorphosis in relation to the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. You've probably seen the pictures of the stages of the process: the egg, larva, cocoon, and the adult butterfly. I was at a retreat recently led by the International Association of Sufism. The annual retreat is called *The 40 Days: Alchemy of Tranquility* and this year's theme was "Transformation Through Practice and Knowledge of Unity (Unity meaning oneness with the Divine).

One of the presenters was comparing the metamorphosis of the butterfly to our own spiritual transformation. And he said something I'd never heard before. He said that in the chrysalis stage, all that is inside the cocoon is goo. If you were to cut one open at just the right time, caterpillar soup would ooze out. I thought this was a great metaphor for the spiritual journey! Feeling formless, like goo: all traces of the former life being dissolved, not knowing which way is up and which way is down, not able to see any hint of a future way of being, in other words, a complete mess. Caterpillar soup. I've been there!

When I got home from the retreat, I wanted to check this out. And it turns out that this

information was only half right. According to *Scientific American*, the contents of the cocoon are not entirely an amorphous mess.

There are highly organized groups of cells known as imaginal discs in there. While the caterpillar is still developing inside its egg, it grows an imaginal disc for each of the adult body parts it will need as a mature butterfly - discs for its eyes, its wings, its legs and so on. Once a caterpillar has disintegrated all of its tissues except for the imaginal discs, those discs use the protein-rich soup all around them to fuel the rapid cell division required to form all the features of an adult butterfly. Jonia Mariechild, describes the process on her website *Butterfly Mysteries*:

"The caterpillars new cells are called 'imaginal cells.' They are so totally different from the caterpillar cells that its immune system thinks they're enemies and gobbles them up! But these new cells continue to appear. More and more of them! Pretty soon, the caterpillar's immune system can't destroy them fast enough. More and more of the imaginal cells survive. And then an amazing thing happens! The tiny lonely imaginal cells start to clump together. They all resonate together at the same frequency, passing information from one to another. Then after awhile, another amazing thing happens! The clumps of imaginal cells start to cluster together! A long string of clumping and clustering cells, all resonating at the same frequency, all passing information there inside the chrysalis. A wave of Good News travels throughout the system - lurches and heaves, but not yet a butterfly. Then at some point, the entire long string of imaginal cells suddenly realizes all together that it is Something Different from the caterpillar. Something New! Something Wonderful! And in that realization is the shout of the birth of the butterfly!" Wow! The wonder of nature!

But again, it's a great metaphor for our own spiritual transformation. This imaginal stage is also called the *imago*, the image. Within the goo is the image of the butterfly. You might recognize that word, too, from the theological term 'imago Dei,' the image of God. The author of Genesis wrote that we were created in God's image. Within our goo, we have the spiritual cells, which can make us into something new. Not goo, but spiritually mature human beings who know we have the very image of divinity within us.

Is this a lot of esoteric nonsense that has no practical application in daily life? Not for me. And I hope not for you. My hope is that each of us is in a process of transformation. Maybe you feel like you're in the goo stage, but you trust that the imago is in there and it will work itself out. Maybe you feel like your new self is just about fully formed and you're almost ready to burst forth. Maybe you still feel like a caterpillar, just chomping away on leaves to survive. At the retreat, one of the leaders explained about the name *The 40 Days: Alchemy of Tranquility*. He said that forty days didn't mean that literally in forty days we'd experience whatever transformation we were looking for or what God was working in us. It could be forty minutes, forty years, or four hundred years. The point is to be open to the process through practice and knowledge of your oneness with the Divine).

And when you do, there will be those times when others will see glimpses of your Christ Nature. And like those imaginal cells lumping, clumping, and stringing together to make something new, we will come together for the good of the world. Transfiguration doesn't have to be about someday in heaven. It can happen today. And as Jesus lived and worked and taught in the midst of empire, so can we.

We are in a time of national trial; of that there is no doubt. Many of us also have personal trials with which to contend. Many people will feel great despair at the enormity of the problems we face. But this is where the transfiguration of Jesus can give us the hope we need. The transfiguration was all about the human Jesus. And we human beings can relate to him and learn from his teaching and his example. The transfiguration was also all about the divine Jesus – not a separate entity from the human Jesus, but intertwined with his humanity, at one with God. When we catch this brief glimpse of the fullness of his being up there on the mountain, we see our own imago Dei. And we know that we are not powerless in our being in the world. We, too, are imbued with Christ Nature, that enables us to go down from the mountaintop, back into the world to do what needs to be done.

So what difference would it make if you were to acknowledge and embrace your Christ Nature? What difference would it make in our world if we were to acknowledge and embrace our Christ Nature?

A big difference! Be transformed. Transform the world. Amen

Exodus 24:12-18

The story of the Transfiguration is a classic instance of a New Testament story imitating—and elaborating upon—a story from the Torah. In this case one of the key texts that serves as an intertextual stimulus and model for the New Testament is the story of Moses being called up the mountain to commune with God.

It is written . . .

Then YHWH said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there, and I will give you the Law and the commandments, which I have inscribed on stone tablets, for you to teach them with."

So Moses and Joshua, his attendant, went up the mountain of God, saying to the elders, "Wait here for us until we return. Aaron and Hur will be with you; if there is a dispute among you, turn to them."

Then Moses went up the mountain to where the clouds engulfed it. The glory of YHWH

then came to dwell on Mount Sinai. The cloud covered the mountain for six days; on the seventh day God called to Moses out of the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of YHWH looked like an all-consuming fire at the top of the mountain. Moses climbed the mountain until he disappeared into the cloud, and stayed there forty days and forty nights.

2 Peter 1:16-21

What we seem to have here is a snapshot from the middle of the 2nd century. Almost 100 years after the death of Peter we find an anonymous Christian leader invoking the authority of Peter to address the pressing pastoral challenges of his own time. This text counteracts the claim being made by some that the promise of Jesus' return was invented by the apostles.

It is written . . .

We did not cleverly devise fables when we taught you of the power and coming of our Savior Jesus Christ; we ourselves saw the majesty of our Savior. For Jesus was honored and glorified by our Creator God when the voice of the Majestic Glory spoke out, "This is my Own, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased."

We heard this ourselves - this voice from heaven - when we were with Jesus on the holy mountain. Moreover, we have the prophetic word, which is even more certain. Depend on it for your own good as a light shining in the dark, until first light breaks and the morning star rises in your hearts. At the same time, you need to know that no prophecy of scripture ever occurred by one's own interpretation. Prophecy never comes through an act of human will, but comes as people have spoken for God under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 17:1-9

Jesus is transfigured. Moses and Elijah appear and then strangely disappear. Peter is perplexed. James and John are anonymous. God quotes Godself. The disciples are overcome with awe. Jesus tells them to say nothing about what has happened! Mystery and divine presence are pervasive.

It is written . . .

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain to be alone with them. And before their eyes, Jesus was transfigured - his face becoming as dazzling as the sun and his clothes as radiant as light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. Then Peter said, "Rabbi, how good that we are here! With your permission I will erect three shelters here - one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!"

Peter was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Out of the

cloud came a voice which said, "This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests. Listen to him!"

When they heard this, the disciples fell to the ground, overcome with fear. Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up! Don't be afraid."

When they looked up, they did not see anyone but Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anyone about this until the Chosen One has risen from the dead."