

Vocabulary of Faith: The Transfiguration

This morning, we kick off a new sermon series entitled The Vocabulary of Faith....In this series which will take us up to Easter we will be looking at various church-y words.....some of the words we will be looking at are ones we hear all the time.....and some words that we do not hear all that often.....and we will take some time to unpack these words...define them...and understand their context 2000 years ago...and look for the meaning they have for us today.

This leads us to the word we are going to focus on this morning.....Transfiguration....Everyone say Transfiguration....

Do you remember your favorite toy as child....? while there were various favorites throughout my childhood, I think group of toys that stood out most for me were called Transformers....

This toy line....which first debuted in 1984.....was the brainchild of Hasbro Toy Company and Marvel Comics....

Transformers arguably became the most the most popular toy of the late 80s and Early 90s....

One moment, they appeared to be just ordinary vehicles...planes....trucks....cars....tractors....But the next moment with just a few quick configurations, they could become super-galactic interplanetary super-heroes ready to take down all those who would threaten Earth.....

I remember my mother taking me to the mall by our house and begging her to let us stop by the KB Toy-store so I could see the latest and greatest transformers they had in stock....

And when I was especially good.....or if I had saved up my own money....I would with pride get the coolest looking one.....and be so excited to get it home, open the box and see all the different shapes and forms it could be turned into...

Looking back now....I still wonder why so many kids like me were infatuated with this toy...

Perhaps what it was is that these toys were so familiar and ordinary when the untrained eye looked at them....It appeared to be a simple toy....a firetruck.....a police car....an airplane...but for those of us in the know.....those of us who knew the secret.....we saw that there was so much more to them than that.....we knew that with a couple quick adjustments that car could be a powerful robot who was capable of defeating any enemy that came our way...

Now all of that said....as much as I loved my transformer toys.... I think it is safe to say that this idea of transforming.... this idea of transfiguration does not originate with Hasbro toy company....

Actually it goes back about 2000 years ago.....as illustrated in the scripture passage that our lectionary....that the global church lifts up today....

Now before we dive deeper into the story of the transfiguration of Jesus....I just want to take a moment and remind us to be cautious when approaching this text...

Cautious because when reading a scripture passage like this we can tend to forget the lense in which we are seeing it....

Because unlike those who first heard about this occurrence....unlike the disciples who actually experienced it firsthand... we know the greater narrative.....we know the story of Jesus' miraculous birth....We know the story of the Heavens opening up when he was Baptized and we know the story of his resurrection....

But James, Peter and John...the ones experiencing this is real-time didn't have the full-perspective we have...

Up to this point in the story they had seen Jesus preach....they had seen Jesus teach....they had even seen Jesus perform a few miracles...and proclaim to be the son of God....the messiah....

But all of that was actually nothing new in Galilee at that time....there were plenty of people running around....claiming to be the son of God....claiming to be the one who would save Israel from its enemies...

So what makes Jesus so different???? This was surely a question that the disciples had to be wrestling with up to this point....

Up to this point, the disciples pretty much have to take it on faith that Jesus is who he says he is...what other confirmation do they have up to this point?

Now I am sure they had a feeling in their gut that there is something different about this guy.....but maybe to them he is just a super-enlightened Rabbi with a close connection to God....

However, everything changes...there entire understanding of who Jesus really is changes with the transfiguration.....

It probably started out like any other day....with Jesus teaching those around him.....but then he approaches James, Peter and John and says "Hey lets go on retreat....lets go to the top of the mountain to pray..."

Being good students, they follow their teacher as he climbs up the mountain and everything is going as they expected until suddenly and without warning, the most unexpected thing happens...

Like a scene straight out of a transformers movie, right in front of their eyes....Jesus changes.

The text says his clothes become dazzling white.....and that the disciples now see Jesus in a totally new light....

And not only that....but then two other heroes of the faith join them...

Moses...who led God's people out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land....and Elijah the great prophet...and they both start talking to Jesus...

Again, put yourself in John, Peter and James' shoes....what an experience this must have been....

And while we are not told in the text what the conversation amongst Jesus, Moses and Elijah was about....we can imagine that it might have included Elijah and Moses preparing Jesus for what was to come next...

Jesus has just foretold his death and resurrection and he knows that he is about to turn his fate over to Jerusalem...

Jesus has grown up in the region of Galilee in the north....but now he is about to journey down to Jerusalem where he knows will face the authorities who will do everything in their power to stop him...

I can just imagine Moses and Elijah offering Jesus a word of encouragement and comfort....telling him *"You can do this....you can go forward with this....yes it will be difficult...but you can do this..."*

James and John, taking this all in....blown away by this experience and not even really sure what to say but Peter feels this impulse to speak up and attempt to capture the moment...Peter wants to freeze time...he wants to remain in the presence of this holy occurrence....so he runs to Jesus and says Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings...and we can stay here in this beautiful, wonderful moment...

But before he can even finish his thought.... God interrupts and redirects. A cloud descends upon them and from the cloud comes a voice... *"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*

And then just as quickly as the transfiguration happened, it fades away....the light dims....the cloud dissipates....Moses and Elijah disappear...and it is back to Jesus, Peter, James and John on the mountain....

The moment is over almost as quickly as it started....and they cannot stay on this mountain....God redirects them because the mission is back in the Valley....the mission is among the muck and mess of the world.

Jesus did not come just so he could take his disciples on retreat....Jesus didn't come so that we could be secluded and removed from the world....

No...Jesus came to be in the midst of the mess of the world...and to transform it into something new...

They can't stay on the mountain...that isn't where the mission is...

So why then, this moment and why is it so fleeting?

What is God trying to give James, Peter, John and Jesus in this moment?

The scholar and theologian N.T. Wright points out that the gift of the transfiguration....this glimpse of Heaven...this spiritual mountaintop experience is not an end in itself....but it is to prepare and equip them to be able to come down the mountain with their hearts held high....like a booster shot....

God knows what is ahead....God knows what is coming and if they are going to make it through it, they are going to need to depend on this moment on the mountain...

This moment when they got the confirmation and assurance of who Jesus really was...This moment when James, Peter and John witnessed that there was so much more to Jesus than what meets the eye...

They will need this moment when the going gets tough...and sure enough it does.... if you were to read on in the chapter as soon as they get down from the mountain a man runs up to them with a sick child....” Jesus do something about it...”

In no time at all they are back in the world of panic.... illness....fear...and brokenness....

Jesus is right back at it....and it will continue to be true as they journey on to Jerusalem... they will continually have to look back at this mountaintop experience to get them through their mission...

I imagine that Jesus was not the only one transfigured on that mountain...but that for Peter, James and John...their eyesight...their ability to know that they are not alone in this world...that the one who is with them is truly the son of God...that their perspective on the world is never the same again...

Which leads us to the question I think we really ask ourselves every week in worship.....What does this moment have to do with us 2,000 years later?

Why annually....do the lectionary writers bring us back to this story...? To this High Holy Day in the church calendar?

I think part of it has something to do with the fact that it is so easy for us to understand and want to follow Peter's impulse to stay on that mountaintop...

I trust that most of us here have at one point or another had spiritual....mountaintop-type of experience....whether it happened at a retreat...or summer camp....or on vacation.....or maybe you have a place you go to that helps you feel closer to God...a walk on the beach or watching the sunset....or maybe it was revival-type experience where you were able to re-focus what your life was about.... Whatever it was I hope that you have some kind of moment that you can look back on and remember that feeling of being Close to God....

I know for me as a child, my parents saw the opportunity to have a few days away from me and seized it with enthusiasm as they signed me up for summer camp at Joseph Badger Meadows Christian retreat center in Trumbull County, Ohio.

And before I knew what was happening they had dropped me off in a God-forsaken place...and left me there with tears rolling down my face as they drove away in a cloud of dust...

5 days later however...when they came back to pick me up, I literally did everything I could to try to convince them to let me stay at that now God-blessed place for me....and the only way they got me out of there was promising to sign me back up for camp the next summer...

And that began a life-long journey for me of going back to camp each summer and finding renewal and connection in the presence of God....camp was a place where many times I felt the temptation to figure out a way I could stay there forever...

However, the problem is that is not where the mission was or is for me....that is not where the work that I have been called to do is...I quickly realized that I have got come down from the mountain and enter back into my work in the world....

But what I can do is use that glimpse...that retreat...those experiences to encourage me when the going gets hard...or when I am down in the valley dealing with the dark stuff....

And no matter how overwhelmed or hopeless I may feel sometimes, I can look back and say to myself that *God is with me...and I shall not be afraid...*

That's what mountaintop experiences are for and I am confident that is what Peter, James and John took away from that experience...they were never again the same....

This week, I was reminded of another person who had a mountaintop experience....Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said this on the eve of his assassination...

He preached "*I don't know what will happen now, we've got some difficult days ahead....but it doesn't matter with me now...because I*

have been to the mountaintop and I have seen the promised land...I may not get there with you but I want you to know tonight....that we as a people will get to the promised land.”

Essentially King is saying “because I know the God of creation...because I have seen God and been present with God...I can face whatever comes next....I can face it unafraid.....and I can dare to believe that no matter how messy and broken and painful this world may be....and how far from the Kingdom of God it appears now...that with God at the helm there is always more than what meets the eye....

That one day, someday the Kingdom of God will be on Earth as it is in Heaven.....that’s the power of the mountain top...that’s the power of the transfiguration....the transformation that happens not only for Jesus but also for James, Peter and John....something they can always go back and hang their hat on.....a sense of assurance that they can carry with them for the rest of their days....

And I pray that the same can be true for us...that we may be transfigured....not just Jesus....but that we may have eyes that see, ears to hear, souls to believe and hearts to trust that no matter how messy our lives may be or no matter how broken the world may seem...that we as a people of faith can believe....because we have been to the mountain where there is more than meets the eye....

We stand on the brink of the season of Lent....the journey ahead can sometimes be difficult.... We will walk in step with Jesus as he journeys to Jerusalem....and we will be reminded that the very people he was sent to save, turned their backs on him....the season of Lent can be filled with dark days....with difficult days....but we are given the gift of this Transfiguration Sunday to help carry us through the next 40 days....

And just as we Methodists like to say “remember your baptism...” during the season of Lent may we also say “remember the transfiguration...remember your mountaintop experience....”

And even as we enter back into the messy world....may be know that God gives us all the assurance and encouragement that we need to fulfill our callings in this world.

Let us go out in peace, in love and with the assurance that if God is with us, nothing can stop us from Transforming the world in Jesus' name.
Amen.