

## TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD | FEBRUARY 19, 2023

EXODUS 24:12-18 PSALM 2 | 2 PETER 1:16-21 | MATTHEW 17:1-9

A few years ago, I was talking to Jim Knol about his recent pilgrimage on the El Camino in Spain. Some of you may remember Jim, he was the director of pastoral care at Christian Health Care Center, and he led a forum on mental health here maybe five years ago. Jim had been thinking about this trip for years, planning for months, and out walking the Camino for weeks. And then the day came when he reached the end of the pilgrimage, which is this enormous cathedral. So he walked around inside the cathedral, and then the trip that he'd been looking forward to was over.

And as he was kicking around outside with the other tourists and pilgrims, he saw this engraving the masons made on the church which said ΩΑ. And he looked it and thought, “Well, that’s not right. It should be ΑΩ. God is the beginning and the end.” And after puzzling over it for a minute—should I tell someone the masons made a mistake?—he realized what it meant. The end of his pilgrimage in Spain was the beginning of a new pilgrimage at home. The end is the beginning. Omega and alpha.

That’s a good way to understand what the story of the Transfiguration is all about. The Transfiguration story is strange. In Matthew’s gospel we hear teachings that we might find difficult and are told of miracles that may stretch our minds. But we understand what’s going on. *There was a little bit of bread, now there’s a lot of bread.* But the Transfiguration strikes us as something categorically different from the rest of the stuff we’ve heard in the gospel. It seems like something weird that’s been dropped in out of context.

Some scholars believe that’s actually true, that the transfiguration story is based on a resurrection appearance.<sup>1</sup> The images of light, Jesus’s transformed body, and the emphasis on his “appearing” all sound like an Easter appearance.<sup>2</sup> If that’s true, then Matthew followed Mark’s lead in taking the end of the gospel story and dropping it at the beginning of Jesus’s journey to Jerusalem. Omega and alpha.

People who make that argument call the Transfiguration described as a “misplaced” resurrection appearance. This makes it sound like the gospel writers got their pages mixed up in the office copier, but it was likely done to tell us something about Jesus. So what is it meant to tell us?

Well, imagine for a moment that you’re Peter, James, and/or John. At this point in the gospel, Jesus has just told them that he will be killed and on the third day be raised. That’s not what they want the Messiah to be doing, so they protest. They try to stop him. After they get to Jerusalem, they’ll fall asleep while Jesus prays in Gethsemane. And when Jesus is crucified, they’ll flee and pretend they never knew him. When things start to go downhill, the disciples won’t know how things are going to end, and they’ll become afraid. And when they become afraid, they’ll stop following Jesus. They’ll look away or run away or just fall asleep.

But putting the end of the story here changes how they experience the rest of Jesus’s ministry. No matter what comes after this moment, Jesus was, is, and will be the beloved Son of God. So even when Jesus doubts his own calling in Gethsemane, even when Jesus is before Pilate on trial, even when Jesus is crucified, Jesus is doing so as the Son of God. That same ray of light, that same source of life

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<sup>1</sup> See footnote 3 in M. David Litwa, *Jesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014), 113.

<sup>2</sup> The root of *Optanomai* for “appeared” is also used in Mt. 28:10 to describe Jesus’s resurrection appearance. JC is the acting agent, not the disciples’ vision.

that they are shown in the Transfiguration is still there. It's covered up by violence and indifference, chaos and terror. But it's always there.

So what we'll encounter in the story of Jesus's journey to Jerusalem and passion is not a story of decline. It's a story of descent. You could say that Jesus "brings God" into these experiences of affliction which seem devoid of God's presence.<sup>3</sup> And his presence transforms or transfigures them from the inside out.<sup>4</sup> The servant's towel becomes the symbol of power, the refusal to fight becomes a sign of strength, and, most important, the cross becomes the tree of life.

This is why we hear this story right before we enter the season of Lent. It's not to have one big Shrove Tuesday party on the mountaintop before we tone things down for a bit. It's so that at every moment in the rest of Jesus's life and death, we understand who we're following, and we know where we're headed. So that, like Peter, James, and John, we won't be afraid.

That's exactly why the gospel writers put the end of Jesus's story at the beginning. Because the end of Jesus's story is the beginning of our story. Once we know where we're going, once we know that nothing in our lives, not even death itself, is untouched by the life of Christ, we can stay with Jesus all the way to the end. The transfiguration promises us that, in Christ, God will never abandon us. So we can be freed from fear to follow Jesus wherever he goes.

In our tradition, we have a word that we use for that new beginning, that gift of  $\Omega$ A. It's faith. Not just a piece of knowledge or a fact in a book, but a trust that God is always leading us into Jesus's transfigured life. Whenever we get bogged down in fear as individuals or as a community, whether that's fear of change, fear of failure, fear of difference, fear of newness, Jesus gives us the gift of faith. Faith doesn't give us all the answers. It doesn't make the hard corners of life any softer. It doesn't magically make all of our problems go away. But it allows us to see Jesus, our neighbors, and ourselves in a new light. As if there's more going on than meets the eye.

After all, how does this story end? Not with a bigger chorus of prophets, an even louder crescendo of music, or a flash of light even brighter than the sun. No, Matthew tells us that when Peter, James, and John finally looked up, they saw "no one except Jesus himself alone." At one point, seeing just Jesus alone by himself would have been a letdown, a cause for fear. That's not enough! We need more prophets. We need more light. We need to build more tents.

But thanks to the gift of faith, no one except Jesus alone is a vision of hope. Because the light of his glory casts a new perspective on everything. In the light of Christ, all of our seemingly pedestrian gifts and talents become the means of grace. In the light of Christ, all of our frequently difficult or challenging neighbors become recipients of God's grace. And in the light of Christ, all of the unremarkable moments of our lives are grafted into God's future.

In Jesus's light, we see light. And in his end, we see our beginning.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> "There is only one thing that enables us to accept real affliction, and that is the contemplation of Christ's cross. There is nothing else. That one thing suffices." Simone Weil, *Simone Weil* (Orbis Books, 1998), 67.

<sup>4</sup> "Since Christ descended into hell, what we experience as hell, and everything else that can be called hell, has been objectively transformed." Jurgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, n.d.), 66.

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