

TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD | FEBRUARY 14, 2021

2 KINGS 2:1-12 | PSALM 50:1-6 | 2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-6 | MARK 9:2-9

Transfiguration is one of those feast days that's awfully hard to understand. Not just hard to unpack theologically, but hard to understand even what is going on in the story. Usually, the elements of feast days are easy to imagine. Christmas has a baby born in a manger. Easter has an empty tomb. Pentecost has tongues of fire. But hearing the story of the Transfiguration is like hearing about someone's dream. It's one non-sequitur after the next. A surprise hiking trip, clothing as white as bleach (not great for hiking?), and an argument about whether to build a Pied-à-terre in the mountains. What exactly is going on here?

When you encounter a story that seems overwhelming in its amount of seemingly random detail, it helps to focus in on just one part of it. And so today, I want to focus on just one little part of this story. The presence of Moses and Elijah.

The presence of Moses and Elijah probably strikes us as a sort of unnecessary addition on top of an already crowded story. After all, if the story was just Jesus's appearance being transformed and a voice from the clouds saying, "This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!," you would say that sounds like there's enough going on. Why do we need Moses and Elijah there, too? Well, there's the straightforward reason and then there's the fun bank shot.

Here's the straightforward part. Moses and Elijah are prophets. Moses was called by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery and through the wilderness. Elijah famously proved the idol Baal was powerless compared to the Israelite's God. Moses and Elijah were both known figures within the Israelite tradition. They are household names. And people understand Jesus through their lives. There's a reason why Jesus gives a sermon on the mount. It's supposed to make you think of Moses giving instructions on Mount Sinai. And there's a reason why when Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is, they respond, "Elijah." People's frame of reference for understanding Jesus is defined by people like Moses and Elijah who came before him. That's the straightforward part.

And here's the fun bank shot. You notice that Mark tells us this story takes place "six days later." This is not just a way of counting time since the last thing that happened. The imagery here is back to the first creation story, when God creates all that is and then rests on the seventh day. So the story's setting, six days later, is of creation entering into the sabbath.¹ When everything is complete, and creation is meant to be enjoyed. What does creation look like when it's completed? Mark's answer is that it looks like the humanity of Christ filled with the light of God. It looks like the authority of God's ways being recognized. It looks like the voice of God filling creation. The Transfiguration is a kind of preview of God's intention for all creation. It's like someone took the ending of the story, and dropped it into the middle.²

And this is why Moses and Elijah's seemingly superfluous presence on the mountaintop with Christ is so interesting. The implication is that Moses and Elijah might be known figures, but until this point, the meaning of their lives hasn't been fully understood. That when Moses led the Israelites out of slavery, he was also preparing for humanity to be led out of death. And when Elijah showed the powerlessness of Baal, he was showing us the powerlessness of the idols of wealth and violence that we use to control our world. When Jesus is raised from the dead, we see something new about Moses. When the cross is a sign of hope, we discover something new about Elijah. Their lives carry meaning and significance that only becomes clear later on. It only becomes clear in the light of Christ.

It's worth pausing for a moment to think of how radical an idea this is. We are used to thinking of time as linear. It moves in one direction. It would be weird to say that you can only understand George Washington by studying Abraham Lincoln or appreciate Billie Jean King by watching Naomi Osaka. You have to take people on their own terms. Time doesn't move backwards.

¹ In Luke's version, the story takes place "eight days later." Being the day after the sabbath, the eighth day is the typical shorthand for resurrection language and new creation. Matthew sticks with Mark.

² There's some speculation that the Transfiguration originated as a resurrection appearance that got folded into the public ministry of Christ.

But that's essentially the argument Mark is making here. Time circles around on itself. The meaning of our lives and our vocations and our witness isn't contained by our own experience of them. To use St. Paul's image, we see, but we only see "through a veil." We weren't wrong about Moses and Elijah, but there was more going on there than we appreciated at the time. We aren't wrong about our own lives, but there's more going on than we fully appreciate.

This is coming close to a 2 AM college dorm conversation on the nature of time, so let's try to bring it back down to earth. Every once in a while, I have to dig through our archives to try to find some old nugget of information on when someone became a member or when some election happened. And when you're sorting through these old documents, it's always interesting to see what people were talking about. Because sometimes they're having big arguments about things that, from our perspective, really don't matter that much. I recently came across minutes from an annual meeting a few decades ago where there was some lively discussion about whether there should be real flowers or fake flowers on the altar. Sometimes we get ourselves all tied up in what we think is important, and then we look back and wonder what we were so concerned about.

But sometimes the opposite is true, too. Sometimes when you read these old minutes there are little asides that are tossed in about things that end up becoming hugely important later on. The most impactful legacies begin not with a *Buckle up for my big idea* but with a *By the way*. People don't fully appreciate the good they are bringing into the world.

That's what transfiguration is about. Transfiguration reminds us that we never really know the full meaning of things until creation is completed. We never really know for certain what something means for us until the light of Christ shines on everything.

That gives us a kind of humble courage when we look to the future. It makes us humble because it reminds us that our own efforts will be judged, too. That the meaning of our lives is never contained by our own intentions and the stories we tell ourselves. Things that we think are incredibly important might turn out to be of less consequences than we thought. Whenever I go through the archives and scratch my head at what Pastor Swanberg was doing back in the 1960s, it helps to remember that decades from now someone will be scratching their head wondering what on earth Pastor Charcuterie Pail was thinking in 2021. We study the past not because we want to pat ourselves on the back for being more enlightened than our predecessors, but because we need to remind ourselves that our vision is veiled by our own circumstances as well.

And transfiguration gives us courage because it reminds us that the final judge, the ultimate metric of our efforts, isn't here yet. That we have reason to go on loving and serving and working even when our efforts don't seem terribly important. The most consequential actions we engage in are not the ones that we finish and evaluate on a piece of paper. They are the ones that we begin with the knowledge that we will never fully know their outcomes. As Reinhold Niebuhr once put it, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope."³

That's why Moses and Elijah are there with Jesus. Because we are there, too. Because when Jesus is transfigured, it's not simply Moses and Elijah who are revealed next to him in a new way, but our own lives, our own efforts, our own so-called successes and thought-to-be failures, and everything in between. Everything is saved by hope. Everything is made new. The veil is lifted, and everything is held in the light.

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³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 63.