

Sermon for Sunday, February 14, 2021 - "Transfiguration = Metamorphosis"

Transfiguration of Our Lord - Last Sunday after Epiphany
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

We hear a version of this story every year. It's at once familiar and yet also so very strange and mysterious.

This year, one word in this passage has helped the story to come alive again for me - the amazing word *metamorphosis*. I know, you didn't hear that word when I just read the passage but it's there. The word translated as *transfigured* - Jesus was transfigured before them - is actually *metemphorone* as in *metamorphosis*.

The way that Mark tells this story, Jesus undergoes metamorphosis, like a tadpole does when becoming a frog, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. This happens right before their very eyes. According to Mark, Jesus isn't just altered for a time. He doesn't just look different. Jesus is changed, transformed.

I don't know what that means for Jesus. I don't think we are supposed to understand or explain what happened to Jesus. I do think we're supposed to take notice. I do think we're supposed to see that God is in the business of metamorphosis, that God is about transfiguration and transformation. We see this everywhere we look in creation. We see complete or partial metamorphosis happen in beetles, butterflies, moths, wasps, dragonflies, grasshoppers, frogs, toads, and salamanders. We see transformation throughout the natural world.

Bishop Desmond Tutu has written about a transfiguration experience he had in a garden at a very difficult time during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. It was during the Feast of Transfiguration, when the church remembers this story of Jesus on the mountain, and the bishop had gone into a garden to pray.

He writes, "It was winter: the grass was pale and dry and nobody would have believed that in a few weeks' time it would be lush and green and beautiful again, it would be transfigured. As I sat quietly in the garden I realized the power of transfiguration--of God's transformation--in our world. The principle of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass that covers our veld in winter becomes bright green again. Or when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that the birds sit chirping in the leafy branches. Or when the once dry streams gurgle with swift-flowing water. When winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience its own resurrection." He continues, "The principle of transfiguration says nothing, no one, and no situation is 'untransfigurable,' that the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration ... "¹

¹ *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, by Desmond Tutu. (Us: Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc., 2004), pgs. 3-4

We see examples of transfiguration, metamorphosis, in both nature and scripture. The Apostle Peter continually gets things wrong, denies Jesus three times, abandons him, and yet is transfigured into the leader of the church. The Apostle Paul is transformed from someone who violently persecutes Christians into a great messenger of the Gospel. And Bishop Tutu says, "As I sat in the priory garden I thought of our desperate political situation in the light of this principle of transfiguration, and from that moment on, it has helped me to see with new eyes. I have witnessed time and again the improbable redemptions that are possible in our world."²

I think this is what we are longing for right now as we look to a post-COVID world. We are longing for not just a return to normal but for transfiguration, metamorphosis, transformation. And this story of the Transfiguration of Jesus points us to the most powerful way that God brings such change in the human world. It points us to the cross. To see that, we have to consider the context in which this story happens.

Just before this event on the mountain, Jesus has started telling his disciples that he will undergo great suffering and rejection, that he will be killed and after three days rise again. This seems so wrong to Peter. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. How can the Messiah, God's anointed one, undergo suffering? Why wouldn't God stop the sinfulness of those who would seek to kill Jesus? But Jesus rebukes Peter and says to the disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me."

Soon after this, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on the mountain and he is transfigured. God speaks and says, "This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him." God affirms what Jesus has just said about his suffering and death, about following in the way of the cross. Here too, Bishop Tutu's insights are so helpful. He writes, "I doubt that we could produce a more spectacular example of this principle of transfiguration than the cross itself. Most people would have been filled with revulsion had someone gone and set up an electric chair or a gallows or the guillotine as an object of reverence. Well, look at the Cross. It was a ghastly instrument of death, of an excruciatingly awful death reserved for the most notorious malefactors. It was an object of dread and shame, and yet, what a turnaround has happened. This instrument of a horrendous death has been spectacularly transfigured."³

It has been transfigured because God has endured the suffering and shame of the cross. God has entered suffering, breaking its power to destroy us. No, nothing, not sin, not suffering, not death, nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God. God is present in even the very worst this world can throw at us to bring metamorphosis, transfiguration. Now no one and no situation is 'untransfigurable.'

This gives me such hope as I look at the landscape of our country right now. I so often feel like Peter wanting to rebuke God for not stopping the suffering I see happening. The Federal government just executed 13 people in a seven-month time span after a 17 year hiatus in federal executions. Black and brown people continue to be killed by law enforcement, wrongfully imprisoned, and executed by the state. How can this be, God, why didn't you stop that? Our government separated children from their parents and then lost them. Asylum seekers have been forced to live in squalid conditions in camps on the border when there are more humane, legal options. How can this be? People of color are not able to get vaccinated and when they can, many distrust the process because our government has performed experiments on black and brown people without their consent in very recent memory. This is not OK, God.

God hears these cries and concerns. Then God points us to the cross, to the power of God to transfigure even the most horrendous situation. And God says, don't just stand there and rebuke this and wring your hands. Listen to Jesus, follow him, enter into the suffering of this world trusting in my power to trans-

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

figure. God's power of metamorphosis can transfigure even our sinful, weary and despairing hearts, opening us to listen and follow.

God transforms us through the cross, through Jesus the Word who convicts us and sets us free, through the gifts of bread and wine that become for us the body and blood of Jesus, and through the church that is formed into the body of Christ.

God is in the business of metamorphosis.

God in Christ Jesus is working that for us, for you, for our whole weary world.

Amen.