

TRANSFIGURATION
Luke 9:28-36
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 7, 2016

I came across a story recently. Whether or not it's true, I really don't know but it is a story that makes us think...

A man's face was disfigured in a house fire. He became a recluse, not even letting his wife ever see him.

She went to a renowned plastic surgeon. After explaining her husband's condition the doctor assured her, "I know I can restore his face."

She said, "but he refuses any help and I know he will again."

"Then why are you here?"

She then said something quite remarkable. "I want you to disfigure my face, then maybe he'll let me back into his life."

Of course the doctor refused but he convinced her to let him talk to her husband. Speaking through his bedroom door he said, "I'm a plastic surgeon. I've carefully studied your case and I believe I can restore your face."

Silence.

"Please, just give me a chance."

Nothing, not a sound.

Then the doctor said, "Your wife wants me to disfigure her face so then she can be like you but I refuse to do. I'm only telling you this to let you know how much she loves you."

Finally, the door opened.

Isn't this story a metaphor for what Jesus did for us on the cross? We disfigure ourselves when we sin. And yet God so loved the world he became one of us and allowed himself to be disfigured on the cross. He allowed his body and soul to be disfigured beyond recognition as he bore the physical punishment of crucifixion as well as the horrendous spiritual punishment of being separated from God.

Seven hundred years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah made this prophecy:
“He had no Beauty or majesty... like one from the home men hide their faces he was despised.” (Isaiah 53: 2-3)

Now contrast this image of the horribly disfigured Christ with the magnificently transfigured Christ.

According to Luke, Jesus went up on a mountain, taking with him Peter, James and John, maybe for company, or maybe hoping they would experience something they'd never forget.

Jesus climbed that mountain just before beginning the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem and his rendezvous with the cross. Already he predicted his death on three separate occasions, causing the twelve disciples to go into deep denial. They didn't want to hear that Jesus was going to allow himself to be put to death. They had too much invested in him they didn't want to see him throw his life away.

As a result, they started distancing themselves from him. Life on the road with Jesus wasn't as exciting awesome as it used to be. Now it was hard and depressing. So even though the disciples we're still with Jesus, they really weren't present to Jesus. He was emotionally abandoned by his closest friends.

We don't know what Jesus expected when he got to the top of that mountain. Most likely he planned on spending much needed time with his father in prayer. Then out of nowhere, something wonderful and mysterious happened. Suddenly Jesus' face changed and his clothing became dazzling white. His physical body, at that moment, was unable to contain his divinity blazing through every pore of his skin. What's more, he had company. Moses the lawgiver, God's mediator with his people, along with Elijah the great prophet. Both appeared in glory and in Luke's words, “...they were speaking of his departure... in Jerusalem.” (interesting point, in the Greek it actually reads “they were speaking of his exodus... in Jerusalem.” The word exodus means the way out or the way of escape. The inference being Jesus crucifixion paved the way for our escape from the powers of sin and death.)

Why was this happening? Obviously Jesus was getting from Moses and Elijah what his the disciples were unable or unwilling to give: friendship and support before Jesus went to Jerusalem to die. This mountaintop experience was a heaven sent affirmation. His momentary transfiguration empowered Jesus to see beyond his disfiguration on the cross and catch a glimpse of the glory of the Resurrection. Simply put, Jesus was given a timely shot in the arm before he entered the last and most costly phase of his ministry.

And that's what makes this story so powerful and relevant. The transfiguration wasn't an end in itself but a pit stop on the road to the cross. It wasn't supposed to last forever it was only supposed to last long enough to encourage Jesus to go through with the decision he made at his baptism, to be the suffering Messiah who would die for the sins of the world.

Peter didn't understand that. He wanted to keep the Transfiguration going indefinitely. Maybe he thought this mystical experience would change Jesus' mind about going to Jerusalem to die. Perhaps Peter interpreted the Transfiguration as God commanding Jesus to forget this talk of being crucified and instead enjoy his glorious identity. Then he could go to Jerusalem Jerusalem and claim his rightful place on the throne of David.

That explains Peter's strong suggestion that they build a shrine on the mountain. It would be a monument celebrating the glory of God and his Messiah.

If Jesus relented and went along with Peter's plan, that would end the story. Jesus' life would then have been as inconsequential as any Greek god's. His Transfiguration would be a rousing end of a great fantasy tale but also the finish of God's good news for the world.

Thankfully this mountain top story is essentially powerful because afterward Jesus climbed back down the mountain and continued his journey to his disfigurement. On Good Friday his dazzling mystical essence was emptied out of him, draining his beauty and majesty "until nothing in his appearance would make us desire him."

Now, the big question: what does this story of the Transfiguration have to do with you and me?

The obvious answer: Jesus sacrificed himself and suffered for our sins so we can have eternal life. If Jesus didn't follow God's plan and at the last minute copped out and ran away, there'd be no hope for us. We'd still be trapped in our sin and come to a bad end.

However, if we leave it there and believe Jesus' crucifixion is just about saving our own skins and confirming our reservations in heaven, that would keep us from experiencing true joy and genuine intimacy with God and each other. Your motivation for being a Christian would only be focused on making sure you have a seat on one of the Titanic's life boats while everybody else is drowning.

So I'll ask again, what does the story of the Transfiguration have to do with you and me?

Maybe what happened immediately after the Transfiguration, when Jesus and his disciples came down from the mountain, gives the full or answer to that important question. As soon as they came down they got back into the thick of things and having to face the reality of pain and suffering.

Peter wanted to stay up on that mountain forever because he knew things were heating up. He knew life down below is hard and painful. It was awesome seeing Jesus lifting people's spirits by his teachings and healing their infirmities with this touch. But maybe Peter was sick and tired of dealing with pain and suffering. He wanted an indefinite break from the

world so he wouldn't have to face the realities of the world. He wanted to stay where it was safe and comfortable, up on that mountain with Jesus.

Isn't that's our temptation? We want to be left alone with Jesus and stay there. It's too painful to face the world's troubles, especially when we know in our bones God expects us to put ourselves in the middle of them. Yes, mountaintop experiences are wonderful because we find ourselves basking in the mystery of God. But mountaintop experiences are not meant to last. We have them only occasionally so we can also be empowered to go back down below to enter the mystery of other peoples' pain and suffering.

Why? Because that's what Jesus did. And then he turned around and said, "Follow me, follow my example, make your life a living sacrifice. When you do you worship me."

This Wednesday we begin the season of Lent, traditionally a season of soul-searching and sacrifice. Most of us were taught to take a long hard look at ourselves, confess our sins and then show God how sorry we are by giving something up for Lent.

If you feel this is a meaningful spiritual exercise, then go for it. Give up something you love to eat, give up something you love to do and when you miss it, think of Jesus sacrificing himself for you. Having said that, let me suggest during Lent you just don't give up something you take on something that will not only benefit you but will also benefit the quality of someone else's life.

You could volunteer your time being with someone who is normally alone and needs companionship. You can contact the Towson Assistant Center and volunteer your time loving and serving the folks who live hand mouth. You could join with others who are concerned about the earth's environment. You could even spend time every day praying for people and situations in your neighborhood around the world.

Certainly Lent is an ideal time for prayer and meditation but Lent is also an ideal time to recommit yourself to the discipleship lifestyle modeled by Jesus. We have forty plus days before the great day of the Risen Christ's permanent transfiguration. If you really want to be ready to greet him at the doorway of the empty tomb, be prepared to first stand at foot the cross to watch and see what length the disfigured Christ will go to save us from ourselves so we can belong to him and his kingdom.

Amen.