

A Vision for Change  
Sermon on Luke 9:28-36 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, February 18, 2007

Have you ever been to a party and heard a really great story? The action is so taut, or the emotions are so intense, or the characters are so engaging, or the outcome is so surprising that the storyteller struggles for words. "Well," she says at last, "I guess you had to be there."

The Transfiguration, the event in the life of Jesus recounted by today's Gospel, is one of those moments. The action is taut, the emotions intense, the characters engaging, the outcome surprising. The storyteller struggles for words. Whereas Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus experienced *metemorphothe*, an outward change of form perceptible to the senses<sup>1</sup>, Luke can't describe exactly what happened, saying only that "the appearance of [Jesus'] face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white" (9:29). Something like that has only happened to one other person in history. When Moses came down from the mountain—a mountain covered in the cloud of the glory of the Lord—where he had received the Law from God, "the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exod. 34:29). Well, I guess you had to be there.

And once Jesus' face started to shine like Moses' and his clothes achieved a brilliant whiteness, suddenly Moses and Elijah, greatest of the prophets, appeared, talking to him; they "were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:31). When Moses and Elijah appeared, they appeared in glory—the radiance or splendor associated with the presence of God. Something like that has only happened to one other person in history. The inventor Nikola Tesla—whose ideas led to the development of fluorescent lights, X-rays, the electron microscope, satellite communications, television, and computers—"liked to leap onto an electrified platform and remain motionless while millions of volts washed over his body, creating

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<sup>1</sup> J. Behm, "μεταμορφώω" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. IV, ed. Gerhard Kittel. trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967) 755-759.

a kind of halo that surrounded him as he stood ... in his private universe of throbbing electrons and light.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus, Moses and Elijah stood there in a private universe of throbbing, glorious light. Well, I guess you had to be there.

The story of the Transfiguration is the kind of story that leaves you at a loss for words: too incredible to describe, too mysterious to explain. Any attempt to bring this event into our realm of experience, any attempt to draw a moralizing lesson is bound to fail. As Fred Craddock warns preachers, “Applications and exhortations trivialize” the Transfiguration.<sup>3</sup> Even Peter, James, and John—who were there and saw what happened—“kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen” (9:36). I guess you had to be there.

And yet, because of Luke’s storytelling, we *are* there: there on the mountaintop with Jesus and the disciples, there when Moses and Elijah appear, there to overhear them talking to Jesus about the fate he was about to encounter. And it is a sight to behold: Jesus praying, his disciples fighting off sleep, the glorious appearance of the representatives of the Law and the Prophets, the cloud suddenly descending, a voice declaring, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (9:35).

What is it all about? What does it all mean? The Transfiguration of Jesus is many things. It is an epiphany, a moment when Jesus is revealed as the Son of God. It is an indication that as Son of God Jesus is also “the One chosen by God to carry out his purpose (which includes suffering on the cross).”<sup>4</sup> It is a time of confirmation when God “unveiled and sanctioned Jesus’ status and mission.”<sup>5</sup> And according to Jesus, it is a “vision” (Mt. 17:9).

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<sup>2</sup> E. Randall Floyd, *The Good, the Bad, and the Mad: Some Weird People in American History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1999) 149.

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 132.

<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978) 380.

<sup>5</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997) 384.

It is a vision *of* change: The appearance of Jesus' face changes. His clothes change into a dazzling white. The cast of characters changes as Moses and Elijah appear on the scene. The mountaintop changes into the place of divine encounter when it is overshadowed by the cloud of God's glory. The disciples are changed as the result of entering the cloud and hearing the voice of God.

The Transfiguration is also a vision *for* change. This event, shrouded as it is in "cloud and majesty and awe"<sup>6</sup>, provides the disciples not simply with a glimpse of the glory that will belong to the risen Jesus, the Jesus glorified because of the work he would accomplish at Jerusalem, but also with a glimpse of a world changed by that work. Recall that Moses and Elijah each departed the earth under mysterious circumstances. They appear in heavenly glory and speak with Jesus about his own departure, or what the Greek text calls his "exodus." These heroic figures of the Old Testament are not there to help Jesus formulate a dramatic exit strategy; they are there to show that he will fulfill what the Law and the Prophets have said will happen. Jesus' exodus is his death on the cross, his resurrection from the grave, and his ascension to the right hand of God. This is his work, his work of saving the world.

Exodus for the people of God is preeminently a journey of freedom from bondage. For the people of Israel, exodus involved liberation from slavery in Egypt. For all the people of God, the exodus that Jesus accomplished on the cross involves liberation from slavery to sin and death. That exodus also means deliverance from everything that imprisons humanity and causes human suffering: deliverance from oppressive political and economic systems, deliverance from physical and mental illness, deliverance from the ravages of poverty and violence, deliverance from the crushing burdens of ignorance and illiteracy. God's people experience exodus in order to be led into a promised land—a wholly new and completely redeemed creation.

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<sup>6</sup> From the hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," author unknown, 8<sup>th</sup> century Latin text, trans. John Mason Neale.

The Transfiguration is thus a vision for change. The revelation of God cannot be restricted to a select few, nor can the work of God be confined to the mountaintop. The hopes of Peter to remain in the moment, to stay there enjoying this close communion with God, are unrealistic. The world below awaits the transfigured Jesus and his transformed disciples. The world—bound by unjust systems, racked by the pain of illness, torn by poverty and war—is in need of change. We are called to be agents of change because we follow God’s Son, the Chosen One, the One to whom God tells us to listen.

And so friends, brothers and sisters, fellow disciples, I believe we are called to be Christians for change, a church for change, a chapel for change. Last week I asked that you pray for me as I strove to see clearly and speak boldly the vision for change that God was laying before me. I asked that you pray for yourselves, that God would open us all to be faithful to the leading of God’s Spirit in response to his vision. That vision is a vision for change.

As I read the Gospels, I am convinced that throughout his earthly ministry Jesus changed the world by doing two things: he taught the word of God and he healed those who were sick. Often these ministries go hand-in-hand. To cite but a few examples: After preaching in his hometown synagogue, Jesus goes to Capernaum where he teaches in the synagogue and casts an unclean spirit out of a demon-possessed man (Lk. 4:31-37). In another city, Jesus is teaching in a house when a paralyzed man is brought to him. Jesus forgives the man’s sins and heals the man’s paralysis such that he walked to his home, glorifying God (Lk. 5:17-26). Even the text of the Transfiguration is situated between Jesus teaching his disciples about the nature of discipleship (9:23-27) and his healing of a boy with convulsions (9:37-43). Jesus changes the world by bringing to it both the word and the power of God.

As those who are called to listen to and obey Jesus, we are enabled by God's Spirit to do the world-changing work that Jesus did. My vision for us is that we be a chapel for change by investing ourselves, our financial gifts, and our time in the two ministries of teaching and healing. Between the two congregations that worship weekly in this chapel, there are some 125 of us. I challenge us as a community of faith to raise \$100,000 to underwrite world-changing work, whether that ministry happens here in Dallas or in another part of the world. For instance, I work with the Open Door Preschool at Grace UMC in East Dallas. This is an accredited school that prepares low-income children whose first language is not English for success in education. This is a ministry that changes lives. I heard recently about a program in Cambodia that, with matching grants from the Asian Development Bank, can build and equip a school with 3-6 classrooms, including desks, chairs, and a well for \$13,000. Another \$2,000 provides books, computers, and the solar energy panels needed to run the computers. Here is a project that lifts people out of poverty through education.

We can share in ministries of healing by donating to the Golden Cross program at the Methodist Hospital of Dallas, a free or low-cost clinic providing health care for the poor. Or we can join other United Methodists and the NBA helping to prevent the spread of malaria in Africa, a disease that kills 1 million people every year. \$10 purchases a mosquito net treated with insecticide that is used to cover families and children while they sleep.

There are other needs and other projects. We can't solve all the needs or fund all the projects. But we can do our part. I hope that throughout the season of Lent, which begins this Wednesday, you will join me in praying about how God is calling you to share in Jesus' ministry and vision for change. If you are willing to invite me to visit with you about your participation in the vision, would you indicate that on the registration card? Having prayed throughout Lent,

let us use Palm Sunday, a day Jesus committed to his victory over sin, as our own commitment day, a day to celebrate and make real our commitment to changing the world for Christ. I'd guess you'll have to be there!