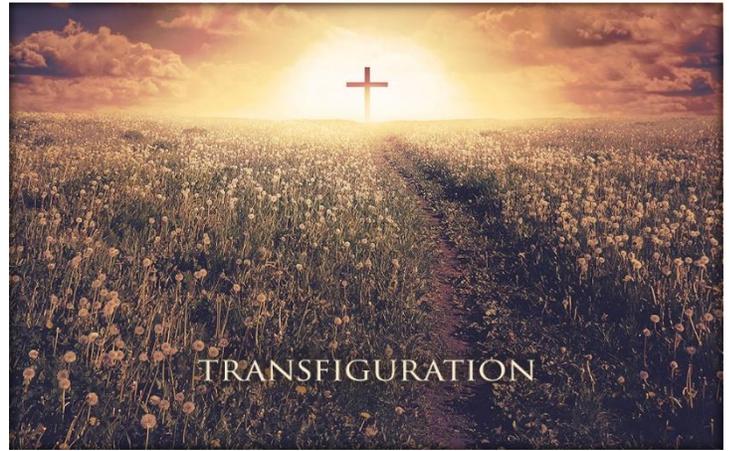


“Inevitable—Transfiguration”

Luke 9:18–43

The true story

Who is Jesus? What is his vocation? Important clues are revealed in the story of Jesus’ transfiguration on a mountain top. There are a couple of keys. When Jesus was speaking with Elijah and Moses, they spoke of Jesus’ “departure.” The Greek word used is *exodos*, for, indeed, Jesus is going to Jerusalem to create a new exodus. This will not be a flight from slavery to pharaoh but from slavery to sin. Jesus will be the lamb whose blood is shed for the sake of Israel and, hence, the world. The second key is to read on in Luke and see that all the gospel writers immediately tell of a sick boy whom the disciples cannot heal while waiting in the valley below. It is tempting to stay on the mountain top, but the world beckons. There is always God’s work to be done.



From the Son of Man to the Transfiguration. The gospels challenge us and beguile us. Mystery and uncertainty. I suppose we should expect nothing less when we speak of the Creator becoming enfleshed. God and Man. Savior and Sufferer. So let’s take a trip to Galilee two millennia ago and see it for ourselves.

A mountain

When you visit Galilee the first time, it becomes apparent why most of Jesus’ ministry happens at the Sea of Galilee. Venture inland to the west and the terrain quickly becomes hilly and difficult; it is no easy walk from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee. Nonetheless, in the midst of the Galilean hills, Jesus took his closest disciples up a mountain where Jesus’ glory was revealed. Do we know exactly which mountain or hill? No, but Mt. Tabor is a good candidate and is often remembered as the Mt. of the Transfiguration. In addition, there are several wonderful look-out spots nearby that give amazing views of Galilee, enabling you to take in the big picture. Jesus would take Peter, James, and John up a mountainside, where all three disciples thought they had found the “big picture.”

The three

Peter and James and John had known each other for a long time. They had met in Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. All three were fishermen and while they were working one morning, all three had been approached by a man from Nazareth named Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus had said, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19). And they had simply followed. All three of them.

Soon, the three of them were caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds who came flocking to this new miracle-worker. As the months passed, and the miracles and the healings and the teachings mounted, the crowds began to wonder who Jesus really was.

There was even speculation that perhaps Jesus was actually John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. But Peter sensed that there was more to Jesus than even a great prophet. When confronted by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter had replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Though Jesus had inexplicably told the disciples to keep this to themselves, Jesus as Messiah was something the disciples could handle. The Jews had waited a long time for the arrival of God’s Anointed One and all Jews knew the Messiah’s job description – cleanse the temple and drive out the pagan foreigners. The Jews knew that the Messiah would come in power and might and wonder and glory for all the world to see. Even fishermen from Capernaum knew all this. They might be surprised to be a part of such big doings, but they had things under control. Or so they thought.

A glimpse of glory

How shocked and confused Peter and James and John must have been. No sooner had Peter declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah then Jesus had begun talking about suffering, how he must die at the hands of the temple leadership and be raised on the third day. Peter and the others couldn’t make sense of such talk. “Suffering Messiah” was an oxymoron – two words that simply didn’t go together. The Messiah was to lead an army in triumph, not die on a Roman cross. Jesus

had even called Peter “Satan” for suggesting that Jesus need not suffer.¹ Take up your cross, Jesus said. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake will find it.

Then, Jesus led the three of them up a mountain in Galilee. There, Jesus was transfigured, *metamorphoomai* in the Greek. His face shone like the sun; his clothes dazzled. Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared; the three of them talked amongst themselves. Nothing had prepared the disciples for this. Perplexed at the least, Peter asks an odd question – Can he build dwellings for the three?! But Peter is cut-off by a blinding light and a voice from the clouds saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The disciples’ world was being blown apart. They thought they understood, but they did not. They thought they had things under control, but they did not. In utter terror and confusion, Peter, James, and John simply collapse to the ground. Then, as any loving friend or parent would, Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them to get up, they need not be afraid. They could trust Jesus. They must.

We are struck by Peter’s desire to set up tents for everyone on the mountainside, as if he could hang on to this moment for all time. Peter is ready to stand by Jesus’ side during this transcendent mountain-top experience. But he would prove unwilling to stand beside Jesus at the cross. We are like Peter in this. We are ready for all the moving, inspiring, uplifting mountains that God wants to give us. But when it comes to darkness and suffering, we have trouble seeing Jesus in any of it. *Jesus will always call us to leave the mountain eventually, because that is not where the work is to be done.*

And, indeed, Jesus comes down the mountain. There is healing to be done and the disciples tried but failed to heal the demon-possessed boy. So, as Jesus always did, he took what was brought to him, blessed it, and gave it back -- here, returning the healed child to his father. Mountain or not—Jesus is Jesus.

¹ Jesus knows the path that lies before him. The last thing he needs is Peter tempting him to take another path, to avoid the suffering that lies ahead. Jesus will be faithful all the way to the cross and it is by his faithfulness that we are saved.