

# “Transformation on Mission”

Luke 9:28-36; 2 Corinthians 5:16-20

## **Transfiguration, transformation, and the Missio Dei**



To fully play our part in the *Missio Dei*, we must be transformed, we must grow, we must embrace our new birth in Christ, and we must be ready. This week we consider the mystery that underlies this transformation which begins with grasping the true nature of Jesus, the one who had called us to be his ambassadors to an unbelieving world.

The gospels challenge us and beguile us. 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, amid the Galilean hills, Jesus took his closest disciples up a mountain where Jesus' glory was revealed, where they would see the truth about this man whom they had been following.

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 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 than 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 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. For there is work ahead.

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 had 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. In him and only in him can we be transformed for the work God has given us.

### ***On to New Creation***

One of the more striking moments in the gospels is when Jesus tries to reassure his disciples on the eve of his trial and crucifixion. Yes, he is leaving them. No, they can't follow him, but they will be better for it (John 16:7). God is sending another one after Jesus, a Counselor, Comforter, Advocate . . . better known to us as the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the Holy Spirit did arrive at Pentecost more than six weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection. This momentous day was yet another sign that, indeed, just as Jesus had said, the kingdom of God had arrived and nothing would be the same. The old had gone and the new had gone. Yes, the age of sin and death was still with the disciples, but there was no mistaking it, God's new creation had come. The disciples had been crucified with Christ and raised with him as well (e.g., Colossians 2:12).

That is the starting point in today's passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians and it shapes everything that follows. The believers, then and now, have been reborn into this new creation. Do you want to know whether God has and is putting things right – just look at the believers, Paul says. Look at them and see what God has done. Richard Hays takes us deeper into this:

When we hear 2 Corinthians 5 in the context of Isaiah's fervent prophetic hope for the renewal of the world, we understand that Paul is proclaiming that the church has already entered the sphere of the eschatological age. The apocalyptic scope of 2 Corinthians 5 was obscured by older translations that rendered the crucial phrase in verse 17 as "he is a new creation" (RSV) or -- worse yet -- "he is a new creature" (KJV). Such translations seriously distort Paul's meaning by making it appear that he is

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

describing only the personal transformation of the individual through conversion experience. The sentence in Greek, however, lacks both subject and verb; a very literal translation might treat the words “new creation” as an exclamatory interjection: “If anyone is in Christ— new creation!” The NRSV has rectified matters by rendering the passage, “If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation.” Paul is not merely talking about an individual’s subjective experience of renewal through conversion; rather, for Paul, *ktisis* (“creation”) refers to the whole created order (cf. Rom. 8: 18– 25). He is proclaiming the apocalyptic message that through the cross God has nullified the *kosmos* of sin and death and brought a new *kosmos* into being. That is why Paul can describe himself and his readers as those “on whom the ends of the ages have met” (1 Cor. 10: 11). The old age is passing away (cf. 1 Cor. 7: 31b), the new age has appeared in Christ, and the church stands at the juncture between them.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing we stand at the juncture of the two ages, enables us to grasp that God has called us to (1) proclaim and embody the Good News, and (2) build for God’s kingdom by doing all we can to feed, clothe, cure, and seek justice. We do so empowered, encouraged, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

God’s Holy Spirit dwells in all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit who reshapes our hearts and minds. It is the Spirit who convicts us when we turn inward to the exclusion of others. It is the Spirit who works with us to foster an ever-growing desire in our hearts to proclaim Christ and to serve others.

### **Reconciliation**

Thus, we are reborn, made new creations, so that we may be what Paul understands himself to be (2 Cor. 5:20): “ambassadors of Christ” to whom is entrusted God’s “message of reconciliation.” It is through us that God is making his appeal to an estranged and unholy world, an invitation to come, to be loved, and to be reconciled with God.

N. T. Wright has long suggested that the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is foremost about God’s embrace of his people who have returned to him. For Wright, it is a story about a people who have been reconciled to the God who loves them, a return-from-exile story. One of the most dramatic moments in the story is when the father lifts the hem of his long robe and runs toward his long-lost son. The father is overwhelmed with joy by the son’s return. You might hold the image of that embrace in your mind and then go back and look at the portrait of God in Exodus 34:67. Who is the father in the Jesus’ parable?

God’s long project of reconciling rebellious humanity to himself began with Abraham and culminated on a cross near the walls of Jerusalem. God has chosen us to be the bearers of this Good News. Ambassadors of Christ.

### **God’s Colonies**

For Paul and the early Christians, every new Christian community, every house church that they formed, was a colony of God’s kingdom. It was to be governed by God’s law. The members of the community were citizens of heaven. They were there to consolidate and extend God’s kingdom. They were there to be the light to the world and a witness to God’s love and ongoing work in the world.

The Christians who made up these communities were not merely people who had come together to do good work for others or to enjoy each other’s fellowship, though there was plenty of both. The Christians had been born of water and the Spirit (see John 3). They were the ones upon whom the ends of the ages had come (1 Corinthians 10:11). They stood at the very point in time at which God had broken into history in the person of Jesus. In Paul’s letters to these churches, he very often grabs them by the metaphorical collar, hoping to make them realize who they really are and who had brought them together.

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<sup>2</sup> Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic* (p. 20). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.