

## **Transfiguration of our Lord, 2015**

**Gospel: Mark 9:2-9**

**Sermon: "Transformed"**

This is it! The big event. Something exciting has just happened in this pilgrimage with Jesus. And, it seems that once again the disciples have missed the point. Especially our poor friend – Peter.

It is the Transfiguration. A big word for a big event. Jesus took a few disciples and led them on a hike up a high mountain. And there on the mountain top – Jesus was transformed from ordinary poor carpenter boy from Nazareth to God-revealed. The Greek word for Transfiguration is Metamorphosis – that miraculous change of a caterpillar into a butterfly. There was no mistaking this change of Jesus. He was markedly different. And as if that wasn't enough – the great prophets Elijah and Moses appeared on that mountaintop to chat with Jesus.

The disciples were surely amazed and terrified. So – what do we often do when we are afraid and confused – we babble. Peter especially had a lot to think about. It was not so long ago that Peter had been adamant in response to Jesus' question: "Who do people say that I am?" Peter responded immediately: "You are the Messiah!" But it was right after that that Jesus' teaching began to change. Jesus began to talk with urgency about suffering, rejection and death. Surely – Peter was thinking – this is not a good thing. And, so here on the mountain top six days later – things are looking up. He doesn't understand what it is really going on – but it sure looks better than what was happening down in the villages. So, isn't it totally understandable that Peter wants to stay on the mountaintop?

"Hey, Jesus! " Peter says. "This is really awesome. Let's set up three altars right here – one for you and the others for your buddies there – Elijah and Moses. In fact, this is so great let's just hang around for a while!" Peter. Peter. Peter. Can't you just see Jesus shaking his head over Peter. I mean – Peter never quite gets it. I think it's why I like Peter so much. I've always figured that if God can use a befuddled guy like Peter – God can certainly use me. And, I can identify with Peter. Doesn't Peter remind you a little of yourself?

We have all had the experience of being in a room of people and someone tells a joke. Everyone laughs – but you. You do one of two things. You either chuckle politely as if you understood the joke. Or if you are braver you say, "I don't get it." Either way it is frustrating. You have that feeling of being on the outside looking in.

When I first entered professional youth ministry I was college senior in New Jersey. I had applied to be a Youth Staffer for the Lutheran Church. The Youth Staffer program was kind of like doing your student teaching in youth ministry. One night, my “interview” phone call came. I’ll never forget the utter confusion as two voices on the other end of the phone began talking over one another: “Hello. This is Pastor Ray. And Pastor Jim. We’re calling about the LCA Youth Staffer Program. DPS gave us your name. We’re from the Nebraska Synod. The SYMC told us to give you a call.” And then they both burst out laughing. My main thought were those similar to not getting the joke everyone else did. I mean what was this alphabet soup of DPS, SYMC and LCA? I had never heard the word synod before. And where was Nebraska anyway – somewhere west of Ohio? And who are these laughing lunatics? And so, I said nothing. I felt frustrated. It was clear I was the outside. I almost hung up the phone. I had missed the point. I was actually about to be interviewed for my first real job.

Sometimes I have the same feelings about Jesus. Sometimes Jesus doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense. I mean, really – Jesus said the craziest things like: “Give and it shall be given to you.” “Love your enemies.” You have to lose your life to find it.” What?!

So maybe it really isn’t so unusual that on that day on that mountaintop Peter and the other disciples missed the point. I too often miss the point as I listen to the words and stories of scripture. It is easy to get caught up in the marvelous Bible stories we were taught in Sunday School – Noah’s Ark: 40 days and 40 nights of rain, the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 with a couple of fish and loaves of bread, a huge fish swallowing up a man named Jonah and then spitting him up on the beach. As a former English major it is easy for me to love the Bible for its beautiful literary content – poetry, short stories and melodrama. In college I even took a class entitled “The Bible as Literature.” I loved that. And, somehow in all of our wonder at the marvelous stories – we can end up missing the point.

And, so What is the point? “From the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved listen to Him!’” Did you notice? – there is an exclamation point there. God says these words with an exclamation point. It is as if God is hitting the disciples and us over the head with the power of that statement. God is here! God is now! God is present. God is here – in our midst in this person – Jesus, the Christ. God is not passive. God is active. Things are different because of God’s presence. God is changing Jesus. God is changing the disciples. God is changing us.

On the mountaintop, God transformed Jesus. This week we begin the journey of Lent – as we walk with Jesus to the cross. The disciples will continue to stumble along the way. So will we. Peter will deny Jesus in the most heartbreaking way. But eventually we will all arrive at the day of Pentecost. Do you remember you will speak to the thousands gathered in Jerusalem during that first Pentecost? It will be – Peter. Our friend, Peter – confused, afraid, not quite getting it – missing the point of the story – never saying the right thing – Peter.

Dr. Joseph Sittler was a renowned theologian from the Lutheran School of Theology. That first year of my life as a Youth Staffer I got to hear him speak in person at a Lutheran Student Movement event at Valparaiso. It was a transforming moment for me. I had gone into the Youth Staffer program to get God off my back. I attended a small Lutheran college and the Lutheran church had paid for a good chunk of my education. The Norwegian in me figured that if I gave this one year back to the church – I would have paid my debt in full. I would be done. But then, Dr. Sittler told this story. He had been struggling with the sense that God was calling him into the ministry – to become a pastor. His own father was relentless and finally said to him: “You can do it. It needs doing. So how hard do you want God to hit you over the head?”

I sense that this is what God does with Peter – with me – with all of us. God says loudly: “This is my Son. This is the Saviour. Now, how hard do you want to be hit over the head with before you go and tell others?” Peter is hit in the head and transformed by the Spirit. Peter eventually becomes the preacher, teacher and leader of the early church.

We are all transformed by the Spirit – whether we are ranchers or teachers, retired or students ... all of us. Most transformations are not as dramatic as that which Jesus experienced. The transformations are often in the small and unexpected things. For me, the transformation began even earlier than hearing Sittler’s words – but those words propelled me on a journey into ministry – one that I could never have anticipated.

We may have forgotten this simple truth. God is not words. God is not the Bible. God cannot be spelled. God is not signs or symbols or stories or even miracles. God is Spirit. God is the Spirit behind the letters G – O – D. God is the first word people said and the first thing people did. God is the one before the words and after the words. God is the explanation and the experience of the word. God is the word made flesh. Listen to Him!