

Transfiguration
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Emmanuel Church, Genève
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Today is the Last Sunday of Epiphany, and every year we remember the story of the transfiguration. In fact, we celebrate it twice, today, and August 6. Do we celebrate Christmas twice? Easter twice? Why is this story so important?

Let's begin with this big word, transfiguration. It is little used outside Christianity. But there is what is called esthetic transfiguration, among Romantic writers, like Victor Hugo. His great character in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the hunchback Quasimodo, is ugly, brutal, monstrous, but the story is about the revelation of his nobility, his beauty. So transfiguration is a revelation of hidden beauty that eventually illuminates the person, and in Jesus' case, his divinity.

The story is about the vision of Jesus' inner circle on Mount Tabor. There they suddenly see Jesus talking with Elijah, the wonder-working prophet, and the greatest prophet, Moses the Law-giver. We heard about Elijah in today's reading, leaving Elisha behind as he leaves in a chariot of fire and a whirlwind. And of course, who comes down from the mountain with its fire and smoke and thunder and trumpets carrying the two tablets of the Law.

I wonder how the disciples knew who they were. Did they have plaques with their names above them or under them? In any event, they were terrified, and Peter could only think to make booths or tents for the three. Then it isn't long before they enter a cloud.

When I was 15, I went on a tour of Europe with a youth group from a French Catholic parish. Among other things, we spent several days in Switzerland, and I remember waking in a room on a mountain in a cloud. I could see the cloud in my bedroom, and when I went out on the porch I couldn't see my hand stretched out in front of my face. Eventually it burned off and I beheld a glorious Swiss landscape...

So the disciples no longer see Jesus or the prophets, covered in the cloud, and then they hear a Voice. If they were terrified before, how much more were they scared then! The Voice says, "This is my Son. Listen to him." It reminds us of the words from heaven at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved; in him I am well pleased."

As soon as the Voice stops speaking, the cloud and other prophets are gone, and there's only Jesus. He finds them, I imagine, trying to dig into the ground with their hands, so scared were they. "Come on, guys, let's go."

He told them to say nothing. I am sure they understood nothing of what they'd experienced, and why should they? They were expecting a war chief, an anointed one who would use the power of God to throw the Romans out and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. The men around him were hoping to become important men, since they had supported Jesus from the beginning. Like King David's men, who were with him when he was a guerilla leader and ended up in his court as important men. The disciples must have been completely horrified and disillusioned when Jesus ended up dead, killed by the occupiers in a horrible way at the behest of the religious authorities.

And then he returned. He was different, and yet he was the same Jesus. Peter, James, and John remembered that strange vision on the mountain, and they began to understand. Not that they understood much, after all, and we certainly understand no more than they. What does it mean to be resurrected?

First, the Voice had told them to move on from the wonder-working prophet and the one of the Law. They were left behind when the cloud overtook them. The second thing is that they had heard that he was going to die. And now that Jesus is alive, the story of the transfiguration becomes a key to appreciating the gift of God in Jesus to each of us.

I believe that when we die, we are transfigured, shot through with the light of the Resurrection. First, we must truly die; as the Psalm says, in the day of our death our thoughts perish. But then by the power of the Spirit — the same Spirit given today to these people being baptized and confirmed — that power that raised Jesus from the dead raises us up too. We become a new creation. But like Jesus with the prophets, we will still be recognizable. But so much light will blaze through us, as well. That's what Transfiguration is.

Today for you being baptized and confirmed, the earth is about to shift on its axis. It opens up something new. The same Spirit who hovered over creation will overshadow you, to transfigure you by the power of God. You will look the same, but everything will be different. And what is today like a seed planted will be one day the glory of God's life shining through you. That we are all to shine with that light, as Jesus was briefly shining for his friends.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis talks about the humdrum of sitting in church. You find yourself sitting next to someone you might not ordinarily want to sit next to, say, your greengrocer. But he goes on to say that if you could see yourself as you shall be in the resurrection, you would be tempted to worship that which you will have become.

But not today, Baptizands! There will a light shining through us all one day, however. The power of God will bring us forth. It starts today, right now.

And never ends.