

Isaiah 25:6-10a
Psalm 27: 1; 7-8a, 8b-9, 13-14
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 9: 28b-45

Transfiguration: the Listening Heart **March 11, 2007 3rd Sunday in Lent**

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The transfiguration story appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is synoptic. In each of these three gospels, the transfiguration narrative follows on a series of stories: the first audible statement of a disciple that Jesus might be the Messiah; Jesus' first proclamation of his passion in which he declares that he must suffer, be rejected by religious leaders, killed and raised up on the third day; and Jesus' instruction that, to be his disciple, one has to be willing to take up one's cross, even lose one's life, for his sake. The transfiguration is part of this series of stories in the tradition.

The transfiguration narrative also is filled with symbols and images drawn from theophany stories in the Hebrew Bible. A theophany is a "manifestation" or "appearance" of the Sacred to a human being. The symbols and images borrowed from earlier Biblical theophanies include: the mountain, the change in Jesus' face, the dazzling white color of his clothes, the presence of Moses and Elijah, the reference to Moses and Elijah's appearance in "glory", the use of the word "exodus", the reference to "tents", the cloud, and the voice of God. Each of these symbols carries enormous religious and spiritual history in any Jewish-Christian context. The construction of the transfiguration narrative from symbols and images of prior Biblical theophanies implies that these disciples have a theophany, an experience of God.

The title the church has given this story, the transfiguration of Jesus, may "cloud" its meaning, however. This characterization of the story implies that the transfiguration was something that happened to *Jesus*, something that Peter, James and John were lucky enough to witness, an historical event in the life of Jesus and the disciples that we can remember and celebrate but not experience. It seems to me, however, the story is intended to convey just the opposite. Together with the other stories in the series of which it is a part, this narrative is meant to convey that the disciples - who spent a lot of time with

Jesus, observed many wonderful moments in his ministry, shared food and drink with him, and traveled with him – only *very gradually* began to perceive him as significant in light of the history of their tradition. When one of them finally articulates the thought that Jesus might be God’s Messiah, they still require intense instruction about what that means. The Transfiguration experience illustrates and dramatizes their moments of insight and ecstasy; but their insight faded as quickly as the ecstasy in the demands of their daily routine. Their dawning realization that Jesus might be the Messiah made it possible for Jesus to teach them about his coming suffering and death [and theirs]; but they didn’t really absorb its meaning fully until after Jesus’ death.

The story of the Transfiguration is a perfect story for Lent because it’s really the story of the transfiguration of the disciples, not Jesus. It reveals the ongoing, unfolding, perception, understanding and vision of the disciples about who Jesus was, and the significance of his life in the course of their relationship with him. But it’s also the story of “one step forward, and two steps backwards”. Their moment of revelation didn’t have an immediate and lasting effect on their understanding. In the very next story, when Jesus learns they can’t drive out an unclean spirit/demon from a man’s only son, Jesus expresses his annoyance with them. “How long much longer must I be with you and bear with you?”, he asks. Immediately after that, Jesus catches them arguing about which of them is the most important, a subject clearly inconsistent with Jesus’ message of suffering service, had they really heard it.

For us, this story is hopeful. We learn from it that the disciples – who had Jesus present to them in a way we cannot – struggled with understanding who Jesus was and the implications of his life and teaching for them. They struggled as we struggle. It’s an ongoing process, to be open to and aware of, the transformation of our perception, understanding and vision. It’s never total; it’s never complete, even in the moments of dramatic insight and ecstasy which occasionally come upon us.

Like the disciples, we are called upon by God *to listen, to hear Jesus*, not to build him tents and tabernacles to “preserve” the ecstatic moment or his presence. God calls us to hear what his life proclaimed, to hear what his words – in the context of his language and culture and religion - might mean for us today; to elucidate the implications of his life and teaching, not just for our most personal circumstances, but for the world in which we live; to accept the necessity of “exodus”, a

metaphor for suffering and death, as part of our search; to understand the connection between suffering and death for God's chosen ones. In the end, it's all in the hearing, the listening.....

So I invite you to turn up your hearing aids during Lent. I invite you to rely not only on mechanical aids such as churches, liturgies, fasting, and other Lenten spiritual practices. I invite you to listen to, to hear, God's word to *you* each day: in your heart, in your perception, in your understanding and in your vision of Jesus, in your talking "to God", in the people who fill your lives – for better or worse; in the national and international dynamics into which we are thrust; and in creation itself.

I invite you to encourage God to speak and to listen to God's voice in all of these. Lent is about listening. In the listening, can be the transfiguration of our hearts.