

FULLY HUMAN

Matthew 17:1-9

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on February 3, 2008, The Transfiguration of the Lord, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

In 1977, I made my way to James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where I was in my second year. At that time the chapel had dark oak wood, foreboding gargoyles, and lighting that one would find only in a cave. The preacher that day was a Scottish theologian whose name I recognized, so I had some anticipation of learning from the sermon, the title of which was posted on the marquis outside: "Transfiguration."

The preacher gave more a lecture than a sermon. Apart from its length, which was considerable, all I remember of the lecture was his stress on the importance of the Transfiguration, the time in which Jesus ascended the mountain and his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Why the Transfiguration was important I could not glean from the combination of the preacher's words, the dark surroundings, and my sleepiness.

Fast forward to the early 1990s. By this time I was preaching every Sunday, in a church with a strong history of classical music and a growing commitment to liturgical worship, a commitment encouraged by the publication of the new *Book of Common Worship* by our denomination. I had begun preaching regularly from the lectionary and had come to realize that that regular schedule of readings called us to focus on the Transfiguration every year.

So every year for a decade or so – on this Sunday of the year – I preached the story of Christ transfigured on the mountain the way I had heard it interpreted by people I respected.

I basically said that when Jesus is transfigured on the mountain – his face shining like the sun his clothes becoming dazzling white – God was giving him, his disciples Peter, James, and John who were with him, and by extension us, readers of his story – a glimpse of resurrection, a glimpse of the ultimate victory and triumph Jesus would experience following his crucifixion and death.

As such, I said, the Transfiguration serves as a glimpse of a glorious future to prepare Jesus, his disciples, and us to endure what he was about to face at the bottom of the mountain: betrayal, arrest, trial, conviction, sentencing, mocking, beating, and death.

As such, I said, the Transfiguration serves as a glimpse of glory to prepare us for the penitential focus of Lent, much like the celebrations of Fat Tuesday prepare for the confessions of Ash Wednesday.

As such, I said, the Transfiguration is God's way of giving us a glimpse of a triumphant future to help us get through the strife-filled events of Holy Week; a glimpse of glory to help us make it through the sadness and suffering of the present; a glimpse of clarity to help us get through the days of confusion.

That is the way I have preached the Transfiguration of the Lord for fifteen or so years.

But this year, I came across a new interpretation of this old story. And I want to share it with you today if for no other reason than that it is different and refreshing. Even if this interpretation is off base, which is possible, we learn from that which stretches us. I hope, as I always hope, that the interpretation I give you today will give you an axis of hope in your lives in our world, an axis of hope that helps clarify the way God is calling you to serve within and beyond our congregation in the world God has created and redeemed through the One transfigured before our eyes.

I.

The interpretation comes from John de Gruchy, a South African theologian I heard speak in Alexandria this fall in a lecture sponsored by the Reformed Institute. In his presentation of the Transfiguration, de Gruchy draws heavily from Karen Armstrong, a best-selling author most know for her book *The History of God*.

Listen for a minute to what de Gruchy and Armstrong say about this strange and wonderful event. We begin with de Gruchy:

Prior to Vatican II...the process [by which priests, monks, and nuns were trained for the religious life], was sometimes rigorously designed to break down one's former personality in order to create a new one, as though you had enlisted in the religious equivalent of the Marines. Mary, the mother of Jesus, portrayed as totally docile and obedient to the will of God, with little will of her own, was the prototype for training nuns. This process undoubtedly produced remarkable women, Mother Teresa among them.

But [de Gruchy continues] that is not how Karen Armstrong experienced her life as a nun...As a devout adolescent she went in honest search of God, but was forced to deny everything she was as a person, friendships included. She survived seven years of training. But in the end, broken at heart, mentally ill and in deep despair at her failure to realize her dream, she left the convent, her vows annulled by the Vatican.

de Gruchy continues:

In the early years of her 'secularization,' Karen, in deep depression, visited one of her former convent sisters who had, despite everything stacked against them, become her closest friend. Rebecca was in the hospital suffering from acute anorexia nervosa. The reason was attributed to her training as a nun. In response to Karen's wistful comment during her visit that Jesus was, after all, a man of passion and sensitivity, Rebecca replied: 'I know. But, you know, I wanted to change...I wanted to be another kind of person' – not her former passionate self, but a serene and obedient member of a religious order.

Talking to her friend, Armstrong then says:

I thought of Jesus on Mount Tabor when, the gospels tell us, his disciples had seen him transfigured: light streamed from his face, his garments had shown white as snow. He had not been diminished but enhanced. His personality and body remained intact but, transfused with divine power, he had perfected his humanity.

Armstrong then reflects:

In the course of my studies, I have discovered that the religious quest is not about discovering 'the truth' or 'the meaning of life,' but about living as intensely as possible in the here and now. The idea is not to latch on to some superhuman personality or get to heaven, but to discover how to be fully human...

This new interpretation really struck me:

- Jesus “not...diminished, but enhanced”
- His “personality and body...intact, but transfused with divine power”
- His “humanity perfected”

Likewise, the religious question defined as

- “Living as intensely as possible in the here and now”
- And as being “Fully human.”

These are words Karen Armstrong uses to describe the Christian life, to describe the Transfiguration of Christ. The aim, she says, is not to provide a glimpse of the life to come, but rather, to transform us to being fully human in this life.¹

II.

Let me draw three brief implications from this new interpretation of the Transfiguration:

(a)

First, despite my own love for the Christian faith in virtually all the forms it takes in our culture and others, I am tragically aware that Christianity often does what Karen Armstrong said it had done to her: “forced her to deny everything she was as a person.”

Whether it is the way that Christianity, in its institutional and catechetical form,

- has denied leadership to women
- has condoned slavery and racism
- has taught that sexuality is an expression of our “lower nature”
- has in some churches stifled the emotional dimension of the faith and in other churches stifled the intellectual dimension
- has in still other churches so defined ethics in merely personal terms that it has looked the other way as groups, organizations, states, or nations mistreat people.

In any of these ways, and in all of them, the church’s expression and teaching of the Christian faith has diminished, rather than enhanced, the human, in far too many instances, forced some to “deny everything that [they are] as a person.”

(b)

Second, if in fact the Transfiguration is an enhancement, rather than diminishment of, the human; it is a tremendously affirming event.

- It affirms what we think.

¹ See John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 63-65; see also Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate: A Nun's Story* (London: HarperCollins, 1997) and *The Spiral Staircase: A Memoir* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 129.

- It affirms what we feel.
- It affirms what we experience – from the world, from nature, from other people, from God, from ourselves.

It affirms all these not without testing and qualification, not without dialogue – with God in prayer, with others in the community of faith, and most importantly with the powerful literature or Scripture.

But by affirming the human, the Transfiguration leaves no human emotion or experience outside the realm of God’s presence and involvement. Indeed, as we become more fully human, we become closer to God.

(c)

Third, if in fact the Transfiguration is an enhancement, rather than diminishment, of the human; it is a tremendously challenging event.

As they are leaving the mountain, Jesus orders James and Peter and John: “Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has been raised *from the dead*.”

I believe a major reason Jesus counsels silence at this point is for him to demonstrate that being “fully human” involves following the pattern about to unfold in his life: living fully into the will of God, giving self for others, losing life and then gaining it.

- The fully human life is a series of experiences that enhances us, but that enhancement involves living to and for others, strengthened by the full humanization of our own selves.
- Without seeing the death and resurrection, one might think that being fully human means a Transfiguration that only perfects us for ourselves, not for others. This is not the case.
- Being fully human is anything but being selfish. It involves suffering with Christ for the sake of others, rising with Christ to newness of life.

That is the pattern Jesus lived; that is the pattern we follow.

IV.

Maybe the interpretation I have given the Transfiguration in the past is the truest.

Maybe, at the end of the day, the Transfiguration is simply a glimpse of resurrection that enables us to make it through the darkness of crucifixion.

But I’d like to live with this new interpretation for a few years, and I’d like us to live with it as a church: to think about the Christian life as being humanity transformed to its noblest, highest, most beautiful, so that what we give to others is the fullest, most human, most perfected versions of who God has created us and is transforming us to be.

Amen.