

August 6, 2023

A Transfigured Perspective

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Before you get a little worried that upon stepping into the building this morning you stepped back in time – do not fret!

No, we are not back in the season of Epiphany – Yes, today is the celebration of the Transfiguration of our Lord

Today, August 6th is the formal feast day of the Transfiguration of our Lord and so since it falls on a Sunday we drop our regularly scheduled program of celebrating the millionth Sunday after Pentecost to recall the stories we hear regularly towards the end of the season of Epiphany

I, too, was a little taken aback when I saw this Sunday appear on the lectionary, but it is no less a wonderful time to remind ourselves of this transformative story

In Luke's gospel – which is also special that we get to hear from Luke even though we are in the year of Matthew (Year A) – Jesus has been in a deep dialog with his disciples for some days as to who he truly is

He has started to tell them about what is going to happen in Jerusalem and his disciples are trying to make sense of that information while also witnessing to Jesus' ministry and journey

The disciples find themselves in a position that likely feels very familiar to many of us – one of awe and wonder and faith at all that they perceive happening around them and yet disbelief, doubt, and overwhelm over the very same things

In a quieter moment, Jesus heads up a mountain with a few of the disciples to pray – and while there, Jesus' figure is *transfigured* right before their eyes

“the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white,” Luke writes. “Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him”

Having witnessed it all, Peter, in his overwhelm and awe, blurts out  
“Master, it is good for us to be here”

To have witnessed this moment must have been truly amazing

But, what exactly was it that Peter witnessed? What did this transfiguration mean?

As I was praying about these texts for this morning a memory from my youth came back to me

When I was in high school, one of the English teachers worked for the Performing Arts Center in Providence

He would organize students who would usher for the different traveling shows and as payment we got to sit in the aisles and watch the shows  
As a Broadway buff, this was a dream come true!

I saw a lot of shows for the first time this way, like Rent which changed my life

But, the show that comes to mind this morning is Beauty and the Beast

Yes, the Disney movie and the Disney musical – you know it?

In the musical, as in the movie, there is a point towards the end of the show where the spell which has turned the young prince and his entire household into a Beast and household objects is broken by Belle’s love (spoiler, sorry!)

And in the musical, as in the movie, the Beast is lifted up into the sky by the power of the magic and as he twists and turns in the sky, the Beast transforms from Beast to human right in front of your eyes

If you've seen the animated movie and know the scene I'm talking about, somehow Disney figured out how to do exactly that effect but on the stage

Right in front of my eyes, the Beast costume disappeared into thin air and the actor playing the Beast went from a hairy monster to the dashing young prince

It.was.spectacular

In that moment you're thrilled for the Prince, thrilled for Belle, and totally in awe of how that whole transformation just happened in front of your eyes

No running off the stage and magically reappearing as the Prince ("ta da!") but pulled into the air and twisting and turning in the sky as the character radically transformed right in front of our eyes – magical!

Okay, so, I'm not trying to say that Beauty and the Beast is an allegory for the Christ story

I'm trying to say that I know what it feels like to watch something so spectacular transform right in front of your eyes – the awe and wonder of a moment like that stays with you

But also, while I'm in this realm of comparing Jesus to the Beast, I do think that the Beast and Jesus have something in common especially in their moments of transfiguration – to the observer they go through this radical transformation (from Beast to human, from a dull itinerant preacher to a changed face and bright white clothing) and yet, ultimately, all this radical act truly does is reveal who this person was, is, and has been all along

The Beast goes through a bit of an emotional transformation during the course of his story, too – for those of us who know the story, we know that the Beast was a bit, well, Beast-y for a while

But the magical transformation in the sky that removed the hair and the fangs, simply revealed in a different form who the Beast had always been and who Belle fell in love with

The transformation in the air simply revealed what Belle already knew, he was her love

What changes isn't the Prince/Beast, but how we see the Prince/Beast

Michael Fitzpatrick, in his reflection on the Transfiguration texts, wonders if this is one of the points of the Transfiguration moment in scripture.

“relocating the Transfiguration from a change happening to Jesus into a change happening to the disciples in which the Holy Spirit showed them who Jesus was all along” is what this text is about. “The Transfiguration happened, but what was transfigured was the spiritual perception of Peter, John, and James.”<sup>1</sup>

These disciples had been traveling with Jesus for some time at this point – they've watched the miracles, they've heard his sermons, they're committed

But, in the previous conversations Jesus has had with Peter and James and John, they still struggled to confess that Jesus was the Christ – to recognize him for who he truly was

And in this moment – whether it was the intimacy of the smaller crowd and the quietness of the mountaintop, or if it was the appearance of Moses and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3601>

Elijah and the voice of God from the heavens – in this moment, Peter saw Jesus differently – Peter saw Jesus

And it made all the difference

Jesus didn't ultimately change in that moment, but Peter and James and John changed in that moment

Jesus is the one who was, and is, and is to come and that is just as true now as it was for Peter and the other disciples

But, I feel a certain kinship with Jesus' original disciples in that while I journey in faith I'm not sure I always see Jesus for who he is

And then there are these moments when it feels like there's a blinking billboard in front of me that is so clearly telling me "this is a God moment!!" "That is Jesus right in front of you!"

Seemingly normal moments are transfigured right in front of me and it is so clear that God is present

I appreciate Michael Fitzpatrick's reminder that the Transfiguration is both about who Jesus is, and it's about our ability to perceive Jesus in our midst – to truly see who Jesus is, was, and always will be

What changes in these moments isn't God, but how we see the God

Our perspective, our openness to the idea that God might be revealed right in front of our eyes, can make all the difference.

May the Holy Spirit continue to transfigure our spiritual perceptions to see God in our midst in the magical and magnificent, and in the subtle moments too.

Amen.

