



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY/8TH EPIPHANY
DEUTERONOMY 34:1-13 & LUKE 9:28-36
FEBRUARY 27, 2022

"HOW NOT TO BE AFRAID"

I toyed with the idea of titling this message – *"how not to be transphobic"*, but, given the current connotations of that phrase in our culture, I thought better of it. Still, our subject matter today is the Transfiguration of our Lord, and grammarians know that as a prefix "trans" means *"on or to the other side of, across, beyond"* as in "transatlantic flight". Pair it with the Greek word for fear - "phobos" and you could in theory, be describing someone who is afraid of going on an airplane to Europe...but I digress.

It would not however be a digression to suggest the Transfiguration of our Lord frightened Peter, James and John who were on the mountain when it occurred. That fear is central to the story. In his version of this, Mark inserts the comment that, by suggesting the erection of shelters to house Jesus, Moses and Elijah, Peter didn't know what to say precisely *because* he was frightened by what he saw. So why did this "change" in our Lord take place? What was its purpose and moreover, what did it accomplish?

To the former question, you can say that the generous use of light to illumine Jesus was akin to the way Moses' face "glowed" when he came down Mount Sinai with the law or whenever he would exit the "tent of meeting" after conversing with God. Elijah was famously taken up to heaven by God in a "chariot of fire". But to the later question – what this accomplished other than to instill fear, what can we say? Did Jesus need this to clarify his identity among his followers? That's debatable - his miracles had already implanted in them that he was no mere man – Peter had only days before the transfiguration confessed that Jesus was the Christ.

Luke tells us that shepherds and Magi worshipped him as the Son of God even though he appeared to them as nothing other than an ordinary baby – as did Simeon and Anna in the temple courts. Moreover, the confession of the church that Jesus is Lord is grounded almost entirely on His resurrection. So why a transfiguration?

It seems to me an answer to that might be imbedded in that very word "trans" – which for our purposes we'll define simply as "change." Suddenly or progressively, but still profoundly, emphatically, lastingly and often frighteningly...life changes and changes us. Harry Chapin's *'cats in the cradle'* chronology still holds– *how quickly 'little boy blue and the man on the moon, and thanks for the ball dad can you teach me to throw'...gives way to 'what I'd really like dad is to borrow the car keys...see you later can I have them please.'* That's change – not all of it bad, it's no sin to grow up or to grow old.

But it is irreversible, like it or not, and when on occasion we take stock of how much has changed in life – who we no longer see around, what we can no longer do or look forward to, it gives pause. There is plenty of change we'd like to see – for example, will leaders of countries ever tire of thinking that war solves anything, or consider what their geopolitical calculations and aspirations do to other people's houses and gardens?

One can only hope – so let us pray Psalm 46 fervently these days, to the God *“who makes wars cease to the ends of the earth.”* Change – the transformation of things. We welcome some kinds and rue others. In the world around us who wouldn't want to see lasting freedom from fear and want for all its citizens? Who wouldn't welcome technologies that can leave less of an impact on the earth when we heat a home or start a car? But technology can be intrusive – even abusive. We rightfully fear some of this change. Technology would have us become “splendidly isolated” but believers know we were created to be splendidly united.

Change is what our story today is about, and at the same time what it addresses. Seeing is believing they say – except our task as Christians is to believe what and because we hear. Therefore, we believe in God who will *“make wars cease to the ends of the earth”* not because of anything the pictures on our phones tell us but because His word tells us it will be so. We believe the man who, when he *“took bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying...this is my body given for you”* that man changed forever the relationship between God and humankind. We believe the man who, when his divinity could have vanquished every human threat he faced, prayed *“nevertheless Father, not my will but yours be done.”*

We believe the man who said *“Father forgive them, they know not what they do”* ...who to men every bit as frightened in an upper room as they were on a mountain said *“receive the Holy Spirit...and forgive as you have been forgiven.”* We believe Him who said, *“blessed are you who have not seen and yet believe...and despite appearances to the contrary every day we believe, simply because he said so, “I am with you always.”*

The story of the transfiguration of our Lord is at first glance, a sight for the eyes. We imagine how bright it was, what Moses and Elijah looked like, if they were tall or bearded or floating above the ground or if they had name tags so the others knew who they were! Yes, it confirmed that Jesus was and is... Immanuel – God with us. But God quickly, or so we assume since no shelters apparently ever did get built, moves his followers from the eye to the ear, the real and lasting and reliable organ of faith. The only one we're privileged to have. Up to this moment in the gospels most people followed Jesus because of what he did for them. But that was about to change – true followers of Jesus followed because of who he was.

And in a glorious moment that existed for and between God the Father and Jesus the Son, our Savior is prepared for His Passion, his Lent, his descent into the sudden, dramatic, and to our senses frightening change of men and women who shouted “hosanna” one day and “crucify him” the next – or, perhaps the saddest of sights - those who simply said nothing at all. In the transfiguration, our Lord moves us from faith based on what he'd done to what he says. And he said *“Father, I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them, and that I myself may be in them.”* How not to be afraid...listen to him. AMEN