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Matthew 16:24-17:8
The Transfiguration

Ry O. Siggelkow

“Transfigured in Their Presence”

The transfiguration of Jesus appears as a pivotal moment in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and is among the most celebrated events of the ministry of Jesus in the Christian tradition. The medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, considered the transfiguration to be “the greatest miracle” of Jesus’s ministry because it pointed to the perfection of life in heaven. In several Christian traditions the transfiguration of Jesus is commemorated with a great feast – a meal celebrating the glory and majesty and perfection of heaven – a prelude in the narrative of Jesus to the resurrection, to Easter. And yet, the story of the transfiguration in the Gospel of Matthew is strongly linked to the *crucifixion* of Jesus, not his resurrection.

The scene appears immediately after Jesus’s rebuke of Peter, the one whom Jesus had previously told would be the solid rock upon which the church would be built. In the first of four such announcements in Matthew, Jesus begins to tell his disciples that he “must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matt 16:21). Shocked to the core, Peter responds to this news by taking Jesus aside and saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Jesus rebukes Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! You are stumbling block to me.” And then he tells his disciples the true costs of discipleship – “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” If it had not been clear to the disciples up to this point the costs to *following* Jesus on the pathway of discipleship, it certainly must have become clear now, perhaps too clear. Discipleship leads not to earthly glory, but to the gallows of the cross. Precisely at this point, we might say that the entire direction of Matthew’s Gospel takes a sharp and painful narrative turn toward the suffering of the cross. The abundance and joy of the kingdom of heaven symbolized in the feeding of the five thousand, and the great life-giving, miraculous power of God, symbolized in the healing ministry and exorcisms of Jesus, is now placed into sharp contrast with this terrible and *terrifying* prediction of suffering and death. The throne of this King is not made of gold or silver, but of planks of wood, pieced together to serve a single purpose: to destroy the bodies of those who are perceived to pose a threat to the established order. *This*, Jesus says, is his inevitable fate, and those who would choose to follow him must also understand the great costs, the risks of discipleship.

On Wednesday morning, Sandra Westby and I dug out the old wooden cross from the storage closet next to the lift near the fellowship hall. I jokingly remarked, “Sandy, let’s take up the cross,” alluding to today’s passage, because we wanted to actually bring the cross up for our Ash Wednesday service next week. While the cross has so often become merely ornamental to our faith, and heavily spiritualized in Christian churches, from its beginnings our Anabaptist tradition has long insisted that we not forget the meaning and significance of the cross as an instrument of torture, suffering, and death. It serves as both a solemn reminder of the crucifixion of Jesus and the great costs of following in the way of love and justice in the world. It serves as a reminder, too, of the many *crosses* of human history – those who have been martyred for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of love, for the sake of peace, for the sake of justice in an unloving and unjust world. The cross is to be a *living* memory in

our community of faith— even a *dangerous* one¹ – that awakens us and provokes us to into *action*, involvement in the lives of those who suffer at the hands of the established powers of our world.

Jesus rebukes Peter and announces his impending death and the costs of discipleship, and then he speaks of the “Son of Man” who is to come in glory, pointing to his own imminent return after the resurrection, at which point God’s justice will come to the earth. It is within this context that the remarkable scene of the transfiguration appears. “Six days later,” the narrative turns, “Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain.” As we have seen throughout the Gospel of Matthew, the movement up the mountain signifies that something important is about to occur. Indeed, many of the details of this story are strongly reminiscent of Moses’s encounter with God on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:12-34:35). In both stories, the events happen “after six days” (Ex 24:16; Matt 17:1); both include God speaking out of a cloud (Ex 24:16; Matt 17:5); and the faces of both Moses and Jesus become luminous (Ex 34:29; Matt 17:2). Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus goes up the mountain to preach and teach to his disciples. Jesus is here again depicted as the New Moses, one who will lead the people from enslavement to freedom, from death to life.

This scene is filled with rather surreal happenings, an apocalyptic sort of “vision” takes place on the top of this mountain: “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (17:2). As with other apocalyptic scenes in the Bible, this story involves the disclosure, the *revelation* of divine activity, ordinarily hidden from human sight. The Greek text uses the word *metamorphousthai* (to be changed or metamorphisized), a word that in Greek society usually referred to a fundamental transformation of a body, a release of the body from its confinement to matter, a movement toward “deification,” becoming like the gods. But in its New Testament use, *metamorphousthai* has a Jewish *apocalyptic* force to it – it denotes, in the words of Paul Lehmann, “the radical changes imminent in the world owing to a sudden foretaste of the long-promised and long-expected world to come.”² Jesus – was *transfigured*. The new world – the kingdom of heaven – had suddenly broken in. And in the presence of the disciples. The force of this passage suggests that the Evangelist wants to emphasize that this is no merely subjective experience, an interior vision or dream, but an objective event, an extraordinary happening *within* and *upon* the ordinary. And alongside the transfigured Jesus appeared Moses and Elijah, two figures who symbolically embody the faithfulness and promises of God, as well as the whole Law and the Prophets, and all the hopes and expectations of the people of Israel.

By all accounts, this is a strange, a wild event, even for the New Testament! And it is strange given its context. Jesus is on his way to suffering and death, entering into the darkest part of his journey and his ministry. And yet what appears here is a light from heaven, his face and clothes now luminous – in this transfiguring glorious light, we see not a victim, but a Victor, not a despised and rejected one, but one who is wholly beloved by God. Then, suddenly again, in a passage that recalls for us the scene of Jesus’s baptism, Matthew tells us that “a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased” (Matt 17:5). This voice from the clouds of heaven commands, shouts out: “listen to him!” Upon hearing this voice from heaven, overcome with fear, the disciples fall to the ground. Now, Jesus, the One who had touched the leper

¹ This is an allusion to Johan Baptist Metz’s interpretation of the cross of Jesus as a “dangerous memory.” See Johan Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. New York: Seabury, 1980.

² Paul Lehmann, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, 80.

(Matt 8:3), who touched the hand of the fevered woman (Matt 8:15), who reached out his hand when Peter had begun to sink in the water, now reaches out and touches Peter, James, and John. “Get up,” he says, “and do not be afraid.” The call of discipleship is no easy road, but those who lose their life for the sake of Christ, this Migrant King, will find it.

There are several parallels between the transfiguration of Jesus and the account of his crucifixion that seem to indicate that Matthew intends a connection. The clothes that shine here with the glory of God are later, at the crucifixion, the object of gambling among the soldiers who bring him to his death. Jesus, here, is surrounded by Moses and Elijah; at the crucifixion he will be surrounded by two criminals. Jesus is here declared to be “God’s Son” by a voice from a cloud; at the crucifixion, the words “he said, ‘I am God’s Son’” become a taunt of mockery on the lips of the religious authorities. At the end of this scene, Jesus is alone, Moses and Elijah have departed; at the crucifixion, Jesus dies in humiliation while the crowd stands around waiting to see “whether Elijah will come to save him.” In both the transfiguration story and the account of the crucifixion there are three witnesses – here Peter, James, and John, and at the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome, the mother of Zebedee’s sons.

As we move toward Ash Wednesday and Lent, I invite you to remember not only the cross of Jesus, but also the crosses of the martyrs who have gone before us - those figures like Oscar Romero who was killed while serving communion to the people, killed for speaking the truth to power, and those like Berta Cáceres, a Honduran woman murdered for working for ecological justice and liberation in her community. Yesterday, we remembered Cáceres on the third anniversary of her assassination here in this sanctuary. And I invite you to reflect on our calling as an Anabaptist community of faith, a living and risk-taking faith, a faith that grows out of the blood of the martyrs who came before us, a faith that is to be *lived out* in active faithfulness to the cross of Christ, marked by nonconformity and resistance to the crucifying powers of our world. “Get up and do not be afraid,” for the One who bears the cross, who is transfigured in the light of the glory of God, is faithful and *with us* to the end. Amen.