

Looking Beyond the “Light Line”

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Luke 9:18-36 RSV

Now it happened that as he was praying alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, “Who do the people say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has risen.”

And he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”²¹ But he charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, “The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” And he said to all, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, and when they wakened they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” — not knowing what he said. As he said this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silence and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

In the liturgical calendar followed by many churches, Transfiguration is observed on August 6. Pope Callixtus III fixed that date in 1456. However, some denominations, such as Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian, have moved it to the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, with good reason. The church year is supposed to be a sequence of events in the life of Christ: his birth, ministry, passion, resurrection and the coming of his Holy Spirit. In the Gospels, the Transfiguration occurs just before Jesus begins his journey toward Jerusalem, where he will go to his cross. So the observance of Transfiguration, in our calendar, comes just before the beginning of Lent.

What is the Transfiguration all about? It’s like a movie preview. A preview presents scenes from what is to come — not complete scenes, but “teasing” scenes, brief cuts that don’t give us the story in a connected time sequence. The preview is supposed to “whet our appetite” for the movie, without letting us know exactly how it turns out.

The Transfiguration is a sort of preview of the resurrection life of Jesus. Consider the description of his appearance. Mark says “his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). Luke says that while Jesus was praying “the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29). Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4:6, speaks of beholding “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Paul, himself, had seen that light when the risen Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus. Peter, John, and James saw that light on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

The brilliance of Jesus’ appearance reminds us of the body of Jesus in his resurrection, as we read later in the Gospels. He is recognizable as the same Jesus. He speaks with his disciples, and eats with them, and invites Thomas to touch his wounds. But Jesus comes in a glorified body.

When he first appears to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, she doesn't recognize him until he speaks. Jesus is able to appear to the apostles in a room with the doors closed. Later he ascends through the clouds as they watch him go. The Transfiguration seems to be a preview of Jesus as he comes in the body of his resurrection from the dead.

At the same time, the Transfiguration isn't just a preview. It's also a flashback to previous stages in God's dealings with his people. Two other mysterious figures appear "in glorious splendor," as Luke says, conversing with Jesus — the Old Testament leaders Moses and Elijah. Luke tells us they spoke with Jesus "of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31).

Moses and Elijah had left the earth centuries before — and it's interesting that Elijah had been taken up in a whirlwind, while Moses died on a mountain and his remains were never found and no grave was ever marked (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). Moses and Elijah seem to have passed out of our dimension into another realm. Yet here they are, speaking with Jesus as though time is the same for all of them. How can that be?

Albert Einstein showed that there is a relationship between time and the speed of light. The faster a person would travel up to the speed of light, the slower time would elapse for the traveler. If you could go to a nearby star at almost light-speed and return, you would find that people your same age when you left had grown much older while you were away. In earth-time your trip might have taken fifty years; to you it would seem like a much shorter time. (I think some of us might like to make that trip!)

The speed of light, and of electromagnetic waves like radio, is 186,000 miles per second. It takes eight minutes for light from the sun to reach us. The further away from us a galaxy is, the longer it takes its light to reach our telescopes. Some galaxies are moving away from us at speeds approaching the speed of light. There must be galaxies in our expanding universe that are moving away so fast that their light will never reach an earthly observer.

That's the situation within our four-dimensional universe of length, breadth, height and time. But physicists say that our universe could never have come into existence unless additional dimensions were operating upon it. Perhaps, in dimensions beyond our four, the speed of light doesn't matter and time has no meaning. Perhaps the Transfiguration is a window into reality above the "light line," as Kenneth Copeland calls it. In that window the disciples were given a glimpse of time to come and time past — both a "preview" and a "flashback" that partially revealed to them God's purpose in Jesus Christ. Jesus is manifested in his resurrection body, while at the same time he discusses with two pivotal figures from Old Testament history what will happen to him when he reaches Jerusalem. In his appearance on the earth, the Word of God took human form. But on the cross he will begin to take his departure, his return to the Father (as he explains in John's Gospel: "I go to the Father, and you will see me no more" (John 16:10).

Moses received the Law from the Lord, and the five Books of Moses tell of the creation of all this, and the origins of Israel as the people of God. Elijah stands for the fulfillment of God's plan; the Jews believed he was to appear before the Messiah (Mark 9:11-12). When Moses and Elijah both appear with Jesus, this event means that the entire Old Testament, from beginning to end, is summed up in Jesus — in his death on the cross and his return to the Father in glory (his "departure," as the Gospels say here). Recall what Jesus has just told his disciples, before he leads them up the Mount of Transfiguration: "The Son of man must suffer many things, and be

rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Luke 9:22). The Transfiguration anticipates these things.

So the Transfiguration of Jesus is a window into dimensions beyond our four-dimensional space-time world, which is why it's so hard for us to grasp. To illustrate, let's suppose you and I are living in what we'll call Flatland, a two-dimensional world comparable to a drawing on a sheet of paper. We would have only length and width, but no height. But then suppose somebody lays a three-dimensional object, like a matchbox, on that sheet of paper. Living in Flatland, we can never see the height of the matchbox. All we can see is the outline of its base on our two-dimensional surface. Then suppose that matchbox is tilted so that its surfaces intersect our two-dimensional world at different angles. We wouldn't understand what was happening. The phenomenon would look like a "miracle" to us, because we couldn't fit its behavior into Flatland's two-dimensional perspective where there is no such thing as "tilt."

Living on a flat prairie we could never experience being on a mountain. Living among low hills, we would not experience being above the "timber line" of high mountains. Living in our "ordinary" four-dimensional world, we have trouble imagining what could be beyond those dimensions. Ordinarily we're not able to look beyond the "light line." In the Transfiguration, however, Peter, John, and James are taken to the mountaintop and given a glimpse of the realm the other side of the "light line," the realm of eternity. As one writer has said, "In Christian teachings, the Transfiguration is a pivotal moment, and the setting on the mountain is presented as the point where human nature meets God: the meeting place for the temporal and the eternal, with Jesus himself as the connecting point, acting as the bridge between heaven and earth."

If you and I had been present at the Transfiguration, how would we react to it? Would we know what to make of it? Would our response be any different from that of the disciples? Peter, for one, didn't know what to make of this awesome, glorious appearance of Christ, especially after Moses and Elijah showed up. Mark says he was frightened. And can we blame him? I would be scared, too. Peter was so shaken up, he didn't know what to say. He just blurted out the first thing that popped into his head: "Rabbi, it's a good thing *we're* here. We'll just put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah — so they can stick around for a while."

Perhaps Peter wanted this experience to last till he could get his mind around it. He was focused on his own perspective: "It's a good thing *we're* here." (What a silly thing to say in the presence of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah!) What he sees doesn't fit into his four-dimensional universe. Maybe he wants the scene to last long enough for him to absorb it into his ordinary world. Perhaps he thinks that if he can put Moses and Elijah, and the transfigured Jesus, into little compartments — into three booths or cubicles — he'll be able to sort things out and eventually make everything "fit" into life as he already understands it.

Is this *our* reaction, also, faced with this window into eternity? Do we want to tame the Transfiguration of Christ, put on our spiritual dark glasses so the brilliance of the glory of Christ won't blind us? Put another way, do we want to flatten out our understanding of the faith, so that we lose all sense of its depth and mystery? Are we uncomfortable with the Christ whom Paul calls "the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:15-16)? Would we rather have a tame Christ who fits into the world as we understand and experience it, and never tries to open up for us a window looking beyond the "light line?"

I don't think we want that, and I don't think Peter really wanted it either. Later, looking back at the Transfiguration, he wrote these words in 2 Peter 1:17-18: "For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain." Peter is referring to the words God spoke immediately after his own outburst, in a voice that came out of the cloud: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Peter did listen to Jesus and, though he had his moments of failure, in the end he became the fearless first preacher of the resurrection of Christ. Peter was transfigured, himself, and became in a sense "larger than life," so that, as the Book of Acts tells us, people carried their sick into the streets hoping that even Peter's *shadow* might fall on them, so they could be healed.

That's our destiny as well: to be given insight into those dimensional realms "beyond the light line," in order to become what Peter calls "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). In Christ we're called to become "light in the Lord" (Ephesians 5:8). Beholding Christ, we're to "be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Does that mean that sick people upon whom our shadow falls will be healed, as with Peter? It could mean that we become able to live above our circumstances — to live a blessed, prosperous life that benefits other people, because like Peter we've seen the Lord in his glory.

How can we begin to "look beyond the light line" into that realm that transcends our four-dimensional space? How can we come into that kind of life that is "larger than life?" Here are some suggestions.

First, think about it and reflect on it. Refuse to be satisfied with the humdrum routine that ties us down. Preoccupied with what we can see with the natural eye, or detect through common instruments restricted to the four dimensions, we fail to get beneath the surface. But consider that, through the Transfiguration of Christ, we've been given a window into eternity. We know that even if we can't detect them with the ordinary senses there are dimensions of reality extending beyond our everyday experience. God may be operating in our daily lives above the "light line," despite what we think we see happening around us. From that perspective, as the song says, "The things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." And, as the Letter to the Hebrews says of Moses, we can "endure as seeing him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27).

Second, do what the voice from the cloud tells the apostles. Listen to Jesus, the Son of God and Word of God. Get into the Bible, and let the Scriptures build the world in which you live. Let the Word of God lead as you press into what Paul describes as "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). Kenneth Copeland tells of the time he shut himself in his garage for a week with nothing but the Bible; when he came out he looked at everything from a totally different perspective, through the eyes of faith. In effect, he lives in a different world since that experience. That can happen to you and me, too.

Third, reach "beyond the light line" through prayer. Prayer doesn't have to be wordy; Jesus taught us that only unbelievers think they will be "heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7). Maybe prayer doesn't require words at all; perhaps it can be just falling into the "everlasting arms" of God, for "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Physicists remind us that what looks to us like solid matter is really mostly space; the distances between subatomic particles at that scale may be compared to the astronomical distances between bodies in our solar system or galaxy. What holds these remote particles together? Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ

is “upholding the universe by his word of power” (Hebrews 1:3). Christ is all around us, and prayer may just be resting in that reality. It doesn’t hurt, of course, to pray with words! But realize there is something else going on that’s beyond human speech.

Finally, in worshiping together we’re given a window into eternity. It’s tempting to come to church, sit in a pew, and think we’re worshiping while we listen to some preacher, like me, talking away. But real worship is more than that. Real worship is a *meeting with the Lord*, who is present with his people in the Word, in the Sacraments, and in the fellowship with brothers and sisters in the faith. When we gather here expecting to meet with God, we’re more likely to “look beyond the light line” and behold his glorious presence — in which there is wisdom, deliverance, healing, and fullness of joy.

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