

It took me a while to figure out a knock on the transfiguration. Since we hear this story twice this year, the first time being on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, I wanted a way to make the story fresh, if only for my own sanity. The more I learn about and contemplate this story, the more I love it and find it important. So I was surprised when I realized that this story has a downside: Jesus makes change look easy. As if he hadn't already done enough to make us look bad by comparison — Jesus is like the smart kid in class who breaks the curve and ruins everyone else's grade. How dare he be so good!

But positive change is the point of the transfiguration, in many ways. In a compact space, this story brims with references to the Exodus, starting with Luke using that very word; I wish our translation kept it, rather than substituting "departure." The original Exodus, of course, was the fulfillment of God's desire not only to liberate God's people, but also to connect with them, to initiate an ongoing loving relationship with them. In Christ, such a relationship is now available to all people. Almost every element of the story is a reference to the Exodus story, from Moses and a mountain, to the light and cloud and voice that indicate the presence of God, to less obvious elements.

The Exodus was not merely an end in itself, although as the Passover text says, "it would have been enough." The Exodus is also a step towards, and a foreshadowing of, the kingdom of God. The original audience would have recognized the white robe Jesus briefly wears as what all the saints would wear in God's kingdom. And while many sermons on this passage knock Peter for wanting to stay and build dwellings, even that misguided enthusiasm is part of the symbolism. I was surprised to learn that the sort of dwellings Peter suggests building would have reminded Jews of the portable dwellings used in the wilderness during the Exodus. Some Jews believed that the saints in God's kingdom would live in tents like their ancestors did.

So the transfiguration points backwards and forwards, in addition to pointing squarely at Jesus, explicitly ruling out the possibility that he was just a great leader and teacher like Moses, or just a great wonder-worker like Elijah. As great as they were, and as enduring as their words and deeds are, like all mortals, they themselves vanished after a time. God sets Jesus between them for context, but God does not say, "*they* are my sons, listen to *them*."

The uniqueness of Jesus is, of course, important for many reasons, but for a writer like St. Luke the Evangelist, the literary value of this moment is immense. That is because of the seemingly negative changes that come later in the story. Jesus is rejected by the people, put to death, rises again and appears to his disciples, and then, finally, departs in the Ascension. The transfiguration puts all these things in context, suggests that they all should be interpreted in a positive light, as part of God's plan of salvation, the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

The people's rejection of Jesus thus becomes not the final judgment, but a manifestation of the very sinfulness and brokenness Jesus came to redeem and heal,

an essential part of God's glorious plan, based on love of the very sinners who rejected him. In showing Jesus remaining with his disciples, the transfiguration prefigures not just the resurrection and ascension, but also baptism and the Eucharist, ways in which Jesus remains connected to and present with his followers, across time and space, and across the divide between heaven and earth.

Before I go on, let me note that "literary" is not the opposite of "historical." The literary record is strong evidence for the historicity of the transfiguration. The first three Gospels treat it as a milestone event in the life of Jesus, John's prologue alludes to it, and the Second Epistle of Peter gives independent corroboration. That, and I don't think human beings would come up with such an elegant story.

Elegant and honest, for the story ends with the disciples not telling anyone of what they had seen, despite its obvious importance, which shows that they either did not understand what they had seen, or that they did understand and didn't like what it implied. Because there is more to dislike about the transfiguration. God did not promise to give Jesus's disciples the positions of greatness they coveted. Nor did God give any support for Jesus leading a political and military takeover. God showed that the story is all about what God is doing for humanity in Jesus, not what we might do for God, and worst of all, God does not say, "consider listening to Jesus in a way that's compatible with your lifestyle and understanding, weighing his words against other teachers, societal norms, and your own desires. God just says "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" God, clearly, is not afraid to be off-putting.

Even this, though, is good news. Nothing that other teachers, society, or our own hearts could tell us can save us. There are good things in these places, to be sure, but only because God put them there, and God defines what "good" even means. The sacred light of the transfiguration is the light of wisdom, no longer reserved for a chosen few, but enlightening the world for any who choose to look there. Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey wrote, "Here [in the Transfiguration] we perceive that the living and the dead are one in Christ, that the old covenant and the new are inseparable, that the Cross and the glory are of one, that the age to come is already here, that our human nature has a destiny of glory, that in Christ the final word is uttered and in Him alone is the Father well pleased. Here the diverse elements of the theology of the New Testament meet." "Ramsey further notes that in the Transfiguration, suffering, knowledge, and the world are all transfigured, for the transfigured Lord touches all. In the Transfiguration, properly understood in its many layers of meaning, is a place for each one of us. Just as all the elements of the theology of the New Testament meet in this moment, so do all of us. For whatever reason we are drawn up that mountain with Peter, James, and John, that reason finds its fulfillment here."*

So we all may find great comfort in knowing that despite all the changes that trouble us, God is working ultimate change for good, and has prepared a place for us in God's kingdom. More comforting still, we don't have to have the right feelings,

intentions, or understanding in order for God to do this for us. As I said, the point of the story is what God does for us, not what we do for God, and if God were to wait until we had everything right, then of course, the project would be over before it began.

God is the chooser; Israel is the chosen people, and God also chooses individuals, like Moses and Elijah, Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Joseph, and many, many others. St. John's observation that "We love because [God] first loved us," indicates that in a way, namely, in Christ, God has chosen all of us. The dazzling light of God is within all of us, whether we look at it, speak of it, or not. But choosing to accept the presence of God in ourselves and others, and choosing not to keep silent about what God is doing, means accepting the changes that will draw us into closer, better relationships with God and our neighbors. Everything God has revealed should make us confident that, as hard as change can be, God's changes are not only always good, but better than any we would choose; God's changes would be impossible for us, but they are easy for God.

*The Rt. Rev. Peter Eaton, "Daily Reflection from the Bishop: The Feast of the Transfiguration," email to the Diocese of Southeast Florida, 6 August 2020.