

Children of the Transfiguration
A Sermon Preached by Gregory Morrison, Trinity '11
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Jesus turns and says, “Hey, why don’t y’all climb this mountain with me before we go to bed?” Now, I like a pre-bedtime mountain expedition as much as the next guy, but I bet it wasn’t what the three disciples had in mind. They struggle to their feet anyway and follow Jesus up the mountain, a mountain which, by the way, probably didn’t have the best marked hiking trails.

Then they witness the Transfiguration.

They witness the Transfiguration. When I can’t picture an event, I seek out those who can. The Renaissance master Raphael painted the Transfiguration – a transcendent representation of the event. In his depiction the sky is a dark – but still royal – blue, a lot like Duke blue, actually. Jesus appears in the center of the painting larger than all of the other figures. A blindingly pure white light surrounds him and illuminates the painting. Jesus is the sun. Jesus is the light. He raises his arms; he presents his palms to the viewer. Moses and Elijah stare fixedly at him, wading through the blue night towards the light.

Cast about on the ground, muscles tense, heads and eyes covered, lay the three disciples, quaking with fear.

Raphael’s painting almost makes sound. You can virtually hear the rustle of Jesus’ brilliantly white clothes. When I look at the painting, I can hear the voice of God saying “This is my beloved Son: hear him.”

Through Peter, James, and John, Jesus was transfigured before all of us, though we live two thousand years after the voice of God spoke from the cloud. Their witness gives us access to an astounding fundamental truth: Jesus, just as he is fully human, is also fully God. In the Transfiguration the disciples receive concrete proof that Jesus is completely human and completely God without confusion, without separation, and without division.

What, exactly, is a “transfiguration” though? It is a change, a *change* in outward form. We’ve heard a lot about *change*, haven’t we? It’s been a *change* election. The economy is *changing*. The world is *changing*, becoming more disparate, more dangerous. On the streets of every town in America we hear ever more frequently, the plaintive “Ma’am can you spare some *change*?”

It’s been said before: the only constant *is*, in fact, change.

But this is not the change sermon, because change alone is wholly insufficient to describe transfiguration. You don’t come out of the beauty parlor with a new hairdo and say that you’ve been transfigured because, you see, transfiguration has an added dimension of exaltation and glorification. On the mountain, Jesus changes his appearance, but is not, fundamentally changed in essence. The “change” part of the Transfiguration reveals something that is unchanging: the double nature of Christ as both man and God.

The physical transformation of Jesus is not the point. What is on display during the Transfiguration is Jesus becoming wholly divine before his disciples, a human face changing into the face of God. Peter, James, and John get to see a change from humanity into divinity. They get to see the man they know and love revealed as divine, known and loved by God the Father. This revelation through change – that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine – is only half of what takes place on the mountaintop: the Transfiguration also profoundly changes the three disciples.

On the mountain with Moses and Elijah, Jesus was glorified. But I submit that there is yet another part to transfiguration. Jesus, Moses and Elijah were only half the participants in the action. The three disciples were there too, don't forget, and their involvement is equally important.

The disciples bore witness to the glorification of Jesus, the son of God, and it is the act of witnessing that I believe truly makes transfiguration. A transfiguration must, in some sense, have a witness to be valid. The presence of the three disciples is what makes the event so meaningful. What would have been the point, after all, of a secluded divine pow wow among Jesus, Moses and Elijah aside from trading the wisdom of the prophet profession?

Without the witness of the disciples, the event would have lost its power over us as Christians seeking better to know who God *really* is. It is our duty as Christians to bear witness to the revelation of the Transfiguration: Jesus *is* God.

Just as the Transfiguration of Jesus would have been meaningless without the participation of the disciples, so too would the assumption of Elisha into heaven have been meaningless without the witness of Elisha.

In the Old Testament story we've just heard, when the two prophets reach the appointed place at the appointed time, Elijah asks if he could do a last favor for his pupil. Elisha asks Elijah, "Give me a double portion of your spirit. Help me to be more wise. Help me to be a greater soul. Help me to prophesy with more courage." But to get his wish, Elisha must bear witness. When the chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire tore him asunder and the whirlwind came down from the heavens, did Elisha hide his face? Did Elisha run away? No. *No*. He bore witness.

Like Peter, James, and John, Elisha's participation made him a witness. And his witness made a transfiguration.

As a place of study and religion, *eruditio et religio*, Duke is a hub of knowledge and of faith. The same teacher-student relationship that characterized Elijah and Elisha and Jesus and his disciples characterizes this university. Now, don't get me wrong, I have no intention of allowing professors to announce to their Monday classes that they heard a student compare them favorably to Elijah and Jesus at the Chapel. I think they might have a few more publications to work through before we can begin discussions of Jesus-type tenure. But I do want to suggest that this University equips students with knowledge and that across campus and off campus – in the Chapel, in churches, in synagogues, in mosques – the Duke community tends a garden of faith.

In these dual roles, as a center of knowledge and as a place of faith, the University can, and does, I think, prepare witnesses for the world.

I believe that every Christian has the duty to bear witness, but I want to take that a step further. Every Christian also has a transfigurational duty.

When confronted with the mystery and the vibrancy and the novelty of the Transfiguration, Raphael, perhaps ignorantly, perhaps fully aware, birthed his own transfiguration. Under his hand, a blank canvass became a vehicle for experiencing the divine. As an artist, he changed one thing into another. As a Christian he did it for the glory of God.

I was able to bear witness to a type transfiguration over Winter break. I visited Charleston, South Carolina, one of the most superb cities in the country. On the streets of Charleston, in the market, African-American women sit and make baskets made from the sweet grass that grows in the low country marshes. It is a skill passed down from generation to generation, mothers teaching daughters, aunts teaching nieces, grandmothers teaching granddaughters. The women take thousands of blades of grass and weave them together to make world-famous baskets of all types. Big baskets and little baskets, circular baskets and oval baskets, tall baskets and stubby baskets, baskets with lids and collapsible baskets, baskets with handles and baskets without. There is literally and endless variety from season to season, year to year. The weaver women of Charleston take the reeds of the marsh and change them into baskets.

They make weeds into works of art. That's the bottom line. They are transfigurational artists.

By the grace of God, you and I can make weeds into works of art too. You've heard the saying "when life hands you lemons, make lemonade?" I don't mean to be trite, but when you see weeds, make baskets. Being witness to the Transfiguration means that we see the change brought about in Christ and recognize the truth of his double nature. In recognizing that truth, we are ourselves changed, and because of that, we are called to be the agents of change in others. God plucked us from the marshes and made us into baskets for the bounty of Christ. We see reeds in the marsh – poverty, homelessness, ignorance, fear – and as witnesses to the Transfiguration we must stop, take notice, and become artists.

Jesus was a man of the world. He ate with tax collectors and prophesied to Samaritan women. He healed the daughters of occupying Roman soldiers and touched lepers. As he moved through his life, as he lived as a man, he saw the reeds around him and made baskets. On the mount of the Transfiguration, the disciples saw everything in fullness and were transformed. They *knew* Jesus was God.

Today when you walk out of the doors of this Chapel, know, *really know*, that Jesus is God. Through the three disciples, that is how the Transfiguration changes us. Armed with that conviction, be prepared to assume yourself a transfigurational mantle. Once we come face to face with the reality of the transfigured Christ, we can never put down that mantle. We are people of the world just as Jesus was. We must see the reeds around us, just as Jesus saw them, and with

His help, we can be like the basket weavers of Charleston. We can become transfigurational Christians.

Peter's first, stunned reaction to what he saw on the mountain was to build a tabernacle. He wanted to exalt God by creating a holy space. He wanted to create a place of faith. He wanted to make a space that would bear witness to what he had just seen. Peter wanted to have a hand in transfiguring the landscape.

In the Transfiguration, God calls us directly; he speaks to us without an interpreter. Second Corinthians hits the nail smack dab on the head: "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." In the blinding brilliance on the mountain top, God showed Peter, James, and John, who are ultimately people just like you and me, that God was human, and, in Jesus Christ, humanity was God. In the transfigured face of Jesus, the disciples see truth. In the voice of God they hear truth. In their bones, they feel truth.

The transfigured Christ is calling us to be transfigurational people. The Christ of St Mark, the Christ in shining raiment, whiter than any earthy snow, calls us to lead Christian lives that go beyond sin and confession, that transcend witness. He is calling us, if you will, to go into the world, making grasses into baskets, making blank canvasses into works of art.

The Transfiguration, for all of its holy mystery, simply showed us the humanity of God and the God in all of humanity. One of us is to be the tabernacle-building Peter. One is to be the basket weaving lady. One is to be the painter Raphael. We are all, somehow, called to be children of the Transfiguration.

Amen.