

We Are Transformed by Color & Light

Matthew 17:1-2

March 5, 2023 *Lent Series Henri Matisse and the Color of Lent #2*

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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

They must have been filthy and sweaty by the time they reached the top. All four of them-- Peter, James, John, even Jesus--covered in dirt from head to toe. Smelly, too. You can't climb a mountain in Galilee without breaking a sweat. Of course, they always looked--and smelled--that way. I am after I hike of the large hill behind our house.

But high on the mountain that day, all that changed--at least for Jesus. The dirty, sweaty Jesus the disciples knew suddenly took on a heavenly aura. His dusty clothes became bedazzling, cleaner than any bleach or extra strength Tide could produce. That day on the mountaintop, you could say Jesus was changed, "transfigured." Was transformed. Matthew did when he wrote his Gospel. So did Mark and Luke.

But I have to confess. I've never been able to figure out the Transfiguration and what it symbolizes. This wild story of the earthly Jesus transformed into a heavenly being, his face aglow, his robes dazzling. And then there's Moses, Elijah. Big heroes of the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish people. And part of our story as Judeo Christian household – they are part of the biblical spiritual family tree.

And then there is the voice from the cloud. All of it makes the Transfiguration story sound straight out of Steven Spielberg movie, right up there with Moses talking to a burning bush and Elijah taking off in a flaming chariot.

Part of my challenge is as a Christian in the Presbyterian tradition. Tend to pride ourselves on being thoughtful Christians, rational Christians. This story of Jesus suddenly aglow with glory, conversing with the long-dead prophets is anything but rational. No decently and in order.

It is a mystical story. The Celtic Christians and pagans speak of "thin places" that are translucent to the divine, places where "heaven and earth meet" and God's grandeur bursts

forth in a craggy rock or grove of trees. Today's scriptures describe such "thin places" of the Spirit: Jesus bright light, radiance, holiness.

Light bursts forth from our cells and souls at such moments, and we along with Moses and Jesus are transformed. The world is charged with the grandeur of God, as Hopkins says, and so are we.

I have never had this kind of mountaintop experience. I've certainly had other mountaintop experiences. I've hiked east side and west side of the Sierras. I have walked around island of Iona and parts of the Highlands in Scotland. Perhaps, like you, I can see God's glory through all creation. I believe the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins' words that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

But I've never seen Jesus or Universal Christ adorned in grandeur. He appears in "dazzling white" (v. 3), a sign of God's presence. Just like Moses when he had been "talking with God", **29** *Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Exodus 34:29*. "Elijah" (v. 4) was taken up into heaven in light and fire. Jesus as dazzling divine light and yet human.. I have not had a dramatic vision like in these scriptures.

Yet I have seen Jean. She was a member of our new church in the Poconos. She had moved up from the Bronx. Two years before we met her only son Christopher was killed in a car crash when he was just 19. Her heart was broken. When we first met she was taking one day at a time and feeling the weight of loss and sadness.

She started coming to worship. When asked if she would greet people she agreed. Each week her smile came a little more easily. When I started talking about starting an after school program for latch key kids, she said she would help with snacks and games. She started sharing more in her small group how God was slowly helping her find some joy again. She felt lifted up by worship, by music, by new friends, by having a purpose. Jean was transformed from a grieving mother weighed down with loss to someone who could find a reason to get up each day and capable of experiencing joy.

I have not seen Jesus transfigured but I have seen Jean.

And I have seen Ernie. He was a member of our new church in Elk Grove. He was a retired civil engineer. He came to church because his wife wanted to be part of a church when they retired. He helped with tasks and was friendly. One day we started talking. A good friend had died. Not sure what he really believed about God, about life and death, about faith. I knew was logical, analytical. Suggested he read Mere Christianity by C. S Lewis.

Next time I saw Ernie he was smiling. Could not wait to tell me "Now I get it. I needed a logical, rational way to think about faith. Yes, I believe. I see it." His friendships in the church took a new depth and meaning. He led some adult classes. He was a team leader for the group that went to Loaves and Fishes to fix meals every month.

I have not seen Jesus transfigured but I have seen Ernie.

No, I've never seen Jesus transfigured on the mountain, but I have seen Jean enjoying children and serving snacks and Ernie leading study groups and serving others. Perhaps you seen such transfigurations and transformations over time , the Spirit healing, empowering, opening, deepening, connecting us. Maybe you have seen it in yourself.

Last week I started our series on Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent. He was transformed as a young adult when he was given a set of paints by his mother during an illness. He was soon known for his boldness use of color and was labeled as a wild beast because of his bold colors.

When Jesus invites Peter, James and John to hike of the mountain with him, what they see is a dazzling, immersive mystery. Jesus shines with a light as bright as the sun. For the disciples and for us, the whole experience is like a brilliant, fauvist portrait of Jesus, a picture of his essence – human and divine, source of love and light.

Matisse has an interesting perspective on light

Most painters look for an exterior light to illuminate them internally, whereas the artist or the poet possesses an interior light which transforms objects to make a new world of them – sensitive, organized, a living world which is in itself an infallible sign of divinity, a reflection of divinity.

Matisse was fascinated by art that boiled down to an essence – not just the essence of what they look like, but also the essence of what they feel like, the emotions they create in us.

As he sought to create this “vision of color,” he sometimes used colors straight from the paint tube, rather than mixing paints together into softer tones. In effect, Matisse was taking figures common in art (objects, people and landscapes) and transfiguring, transforming them, infusing them with bright, bold emotion.

In our painting for this week, *Open Window, Colliore*, Matisse chooses colors that are by no means “naturalistic” to the scene as witnessed to the eye alone, but rather that help transfigure the scene, expressing and evoking vibrant beauty and joy he feels as he contemplates it.

Matisse was willing to be transformed and he offered this new way of seeing and painting to the world. Let's take this openness to color and boldness into the week. This week's colors are:

blue and white: the ocean outside a window, the sky on a mountaintop, the light on a blue jay's wing. Where are the blues in your life these days? Where do you find them most beautiful and transfiguring? Where do you feel "the blues" of sorrow, or the "dazzling bright white" of transfiguration and transformation? Do you see blues and whites together?

As you see and reflect, send photos or reflections to me by Wed. at noon and we will share them in enews each week.

Close with a prayer. "God of beauty and joy, help us to catch sight of the ways you are transfiguring and transforming the world every day, and transfiguring our hearts. Open our eyes to your vision of color and beauty and hope. Amen."

Resource for this sermon

SALT Project – Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent Devotional 2023

<https://www.saltproject.org/matisse-and-lent/matisse-devotional-for-lent>