

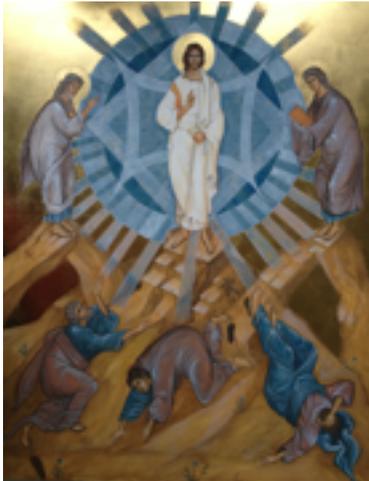
Jesus: More Than Meets the Eye

Mark 9:2-9

Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

February 15, 2015

Transfiguration/Alleluia Sunday



To help us think about today's Gospel lesson let's spend a few minutes reading this icon of the Transfiguration or Metamorphosis of Christ. It was written by Katherine Sanders in Edinburgh, Scotland, based on an early manuscript illustration. Icons are written to be viewed as windows into spiritual realities that we don't normally see.

The upper part of the icon is overlaid with shiny gold leaf to represent God's radiant presence in creation, at all times and in all places.

Christ is central figure. He is robed in white, the color of uncreated divine light, the color of holiness, simplicity and righteousness. The golden sash over his right shoulder identifies him as the "Son of Man" described in Revelation 1:13 and Daniel 7:13. His head is haloed in gold, showing us that the Son of Man is also the beloved Son of God. His right hand is raised in blessing, and his left hand contains a scroll. He stands on the mountain top within a *mandorla*.

A *mandorla* is an ancient symbol composed of overlapping geometric shapes. This one consists of a pattern of three overlapping shapes in various shades of blue - the color of heaven - from which emanate rays of heavenly light. The *mandorla* represents the Holy Spirit who is present as the luminous cloud that covers the mountain. Notice how the overlapping geometric shapes create a space in the center. Early Christians used geometric patterns like this to describe the coming together of heaven and earth, the divine and the human. The space where they overlap is the place that we are called to remain in, the "liminal space." This is the place where you arrive after you leave one room and have not yet entered another. All transfiguration and metamorphosis takes place in this liminal space.

Elijah and Moses stand on separate mountain peaks to the left and right of Christ. Moses received God's laws at Mount Sinai and prophesied the coming of a prophet greater than himself (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18). Elijah also received the word of God at Mt. Sinai (1 Kings 19:1-9) and was expected to return before the Day of the Lord (Malachi 4:4-6). They are both bowing to Christ, thus recognizing him as the one who fulfills and completes the law and the prophets.

Below Christ are the three apostles who by their posture show their response to the transfiguration. Each of them has lost a sandal — perhaps the ancient equivalent of

having their socks knocked off. The three apostles are simply blown away by this vision and what it reveals about Jesus. James, on the right, has fallen over backward with his arm over his eyes. John, in the center, is on his knees. It looks like he might be trying to crawl away. Peter, on the left, kneels and raises his left hand in a gesture expressing his desire to build three tents or tabernacles. Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth, turns out to be way more than a rabbi who teaches, heals and casts out demons. This simple son of man turns out to be the Son of God, God's beloved. The visionary experience and the truth it reveals are terrifying, and the apostles have no idea how to respond.

Take another look at the figures of Elijah, Moses and the three apostles. Notice how they are dressed. Both Elijah and Moses are wearing blue robes that peak out from under their mantles. Elijah's mantle is white, nearly as bright as Jesus', perhaps pointing to Elijah's status as an immortal. According to the Bible he never died; at the end of his ministry God took him up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-11). Moses' mantle is a kind of brownish color. Brown is the color of the earth. It represents human nature and human mortality. Peter and John are similarly wearing blue robes under brown mantles, while James is wearing a blue mantle over a brown robe. The blue is the same blue that we see in the *mandorla* which represents the presence of the Holy Spirit. Ah hah! The Holy Spirit not only covers the mountain top, but is in fact present, albeit partially hidden in each of the persons who are on that mountain.

The icon shows us what the Gospel has been trying to tell us ever since Christmas. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us to give us the power to become children of God (John 1:14, 11). God claims each of us as sons and daughters, just as God claimed Jesus, as God's own son in his baptism. Just as the Holy Spirit descended into Jesus as he emerged from the waters of the Jordan River, God has sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts. As a result, we are all children of God, worthy of love and respect, empowered to make a positive difference in the world around us.

The transfiguration occurs at a transition point in the life and ministry of Jesus. From that mountain top he will begin his journey to Jerusalem — to his crucifixion and his resurrection. The transfiguration points to the purpose and goal of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection which is nothing less than the total transfiguration of all of creation.

God has set the world and each of us on the road to transfiguration and metamorphosis. In the end God promises to be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28), and that we will all be like Jesus, shining on that mountain top (1 John 3:2). The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us to transfigure each of us until we are able to participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Here is the same truth presented in slightly words.



As was the case with Jesus, as was the case with James, John and Peter, there is more to each of us than meets the eye. Luminous beings are we, not just this crude matter. Each of us is a soul that has a body. What that means is that each of us can really make a difference.

Today we celebrate with alleluias the vision of Christ that represents the end goal of our journey of faith. Just as Jesus' transfiguration occurred just as he turned to Jerusalem, the cross and the empty tomb, our celebration comes as we too turn toward Jerusalem, Lent and Easter. For Jesus — the beloved Son of God — the cross and the resurrection were all about walking in solidarity with us in our fear and confusion, our suffering and our dying, all the way to the grave and out the other side. For Jesus the way of the cross was about making a huge difference for all living things. For us the way of the cross should be about doing what Jesus did — making a difference — in our own little corner of the world.

So this Lent we are focusing on solidarity with the hungry and poor. I would like to invite all of you to participate as you are able, beginning on Tuesday, February 17 with our Mardi Bras event to lift up the unique challenges homeless women face in taking care of their person hygiene needs. On Wednesday, February 18 we begin our **Lenten Suppers** featuring simple ordinary meals eaten by our sisters and brothers in Palestine, Tanzania, Colombia and Haiti. I encourage you to pick up “**Living Simply with God Hunger Calendar**” and a “**Feed the World**” **coin box**. The calendar has an easy activity for each day of Lent with suggestions how to fill up the coin box. When it's full bring it to church and we'll send your coins to ELCA World Hunger.

If you are looking to go deeper in your Lenten spiritual discipline and seriously stretch yourself, you might consider Chris Seay's challenge in ***A Place at the Table: 40 Days of Solidarity with the Poor***. He invites us to “eat like the poor for 40 days and donate the money” we save on to a charity or project that serves the poor. To learn more, join Vicar Aleese and me after the worship service on Ash Wednesday, and/or participate in the Adult Learning Session on February 22. Whether or not you take up this challenge to engage in a fast you can use the book as a Lenten devotional. All these resources are available at our Lenten resource table in the narthex.

Inspired by the vision of Christ on the mountain top and empowered by the Holy Spirit let us make a difference in our world this Lent. Amen.