

<i>Date Preached</i>	14-Feb-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	01-Feb-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Epiph Last, Yr B

" Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John,  
and led them up a high mountain "



I have to confess that this Sunday in the Church's liturgical calendar always feels a little anomalous to me. For one thing, even though the *Feast* of the Transfiguration—our annual celebration of the Father's declaring to three of the disciples that Jesus is His Son—falls on the sixth of August, every year this last Sunday before Lent directs our attention—redundantly, it seems—to this same event. We don't also read the account of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem in July, nor do we commemorate His Ascension twice in one year. So why do we 'double up,' as it were, on the Transfiguration?

And then, for another thing, there's that word itself: TRANSFIGURATION. It's out there on the periphery of the English vocabulary, isn't it? In fact, the only literary use of the word TRANSFIGURE I could come up with from memory was in the final verse of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic": "In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea, | With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me."\* When we speak of Jesus' *Nativity* or *Resurrection* or even His *Presentation* in the Temple, we know exactly what we're talking about. But what does TRANSFIGURATION even mean, and why do we use such a recondite term?

In a word—pardon the pun!—TRANSFIGURE means to change the form of ... to *trans-form*. My unabridged dictionary offers the following sentence: "Her face was transfigured by uncontrollable passion." And to be sure, in all three synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration, Jesus' clothes become dazzling white—and in Matthew and Luke, His face also begins to shine. But these superficial wardrobe and make-up changes surely cannot be the intended objects of our liturgical attention.

Another sense of the word TRANSFIGURE is to exalt or to glorify. The musician in me appreciated my dictionary's example of this sense of transfigure: "Music ... will transfigure plain meanings and clothe the verbal substance with a kind of incandescence." Heady stuff, that ... but it begs the question: Is *this* what happens to Jesus up upon the high mountain? Did the Father transform Him from a mere mortal ... or, at least, not-quite God ... *into* the Son of God? I don't believe that's so. For one thing, the Church's creeds and doctrines are clear: Jesus is the earthly embodiment *of God* ... wholly divine from the moment He is conceived by the Holy Spirit.† For

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\* I'll admit that I went down a bit of an internet rabbit hole on this point and discovered a [nifty Google app](#) that enabled me to grace you with the following bit of vital information: For each time that the word TRANSFIGURATION is used in published works in English, the word JESUS is used 325 times; and for each use of the verbal form—TRANSFIGURE—the number of JESUS mentions spikes to 1,857!

† I am playing just a bit loosely here. There exists a line of scholarship that Jesus was, in fact, fully divine from birth, but did not *know* this until He began His earthly ministry. I don't subscribe to this idea, but in any event, the point is moot with respect to the Transfiguration. At His baptism, Jesus has *already* been told that He is the Son of God (1:10-11).

I also note, for completeness, that the Church's doctrine declares that the Second Person of the Trinity—the Word, if you

another, as readers of St Mark, we already know of Jesus' divinity. At His baptism in chapter one, Jesus hears a voice from heaven say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Whatever Jesus needs to be in order to accomplish God's mission in this world, Jesus already *is*, and has been from the outset. Therefore, the thrust of the Transfiguration is not Jesus' *own* transformation.

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Since concentrating on the figure of *Jesus* is not advancing our understanding of TRANSFIGURATION very much, perhaps we need to widen the angle a bit and look at the *other* participants in this Christophany—this manifestation of the Messiah. Jesus brings three of the disciples who are the closest to Him, Peter, James and John, up the mountain with Him. In the moment, they struggle mightily to understand what is happening, for they are terrified—awestruck—by this direct encounter with God the Father.‡

And yet ... and yet, they will never forget what they saw up on that mountain, will they? However mysterious ... however ethereal ... however overwhelming, this signal moment surely will remain with them the rest of their lives. And here, I think, we begin to find the *true* TRANSFIGURATION: not in any transformation of *Jesus*, but in the transformation of those who *know and love Him*. The emotionality ... the transcendence ... the sheer awesomeness of this brief dazzling moment of dwelling in God's brightness changes them forever. From here, they will slog on with Jesus, just as we will in Lent, toward Jerusalem ... toward the Cross and Grave and the Empty Tomb. And, we know, they will be plagued by moments of doubt, of forgetting and of denial. But their brief glimpse of divinity-made-visible ... their tiny taste of God's mercy wrapped in God's majesty ... is now seared into not just their memories, but their very beings. They've encountered the *very grace and glory of God* with not just through their senses, but also with their spirits ... and it transfigures them, forever.

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And here, for me, is the genius of the Transfiguration—and perhaps the reason we lift it up both as a feast day in August *and* on the Sunday before Lent: In our worship, *we* participate in TRANSFIGURATION, too.

When I was at Mt Tabor, the traditional site of the Transfiguration, a little more than a year ago, a wise English bishop preached that in the sacraments, "the Church fashions moments of ineffably revealed divine grace ... so that we may readily and reliably access them, again and again." At the Last Supper, Jesus institutes a means by which we can bask in the presence of God's grace and glory, through the sacrament of Holy Communion.

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will—has co-existed with the First Person—God the Father—since the very beginning of eternity. The Second Person, Who takes on *bodily* form in Jesus, is absolutely equal to the First in every regard possible.

‡ In the literary context of this pericope (*i.e.*, the text that comes before and after it), the Transfiguration may serve a more explicit purpose. Peter, on the heels of his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, has denied Jesus' prediction of the Passion. Further, on the mountaintop, all three are still caught up in the 'old' tradition: They equate Jesus *with* Moses and Elijah, rather than distinguishing Him *from* them (as the Good News). The Transfiguration is an event to declare Jesus the definitive and superseding arrival of the Good News ... of God's Kingdom ... however strange that may appear in the moment.

And thus, perhaps, the key to this perplexing day: We are not meant to unravel the mystery of the Transfiguration with our minds, but to *experience* it in our beings. For every time we consecrate "this bread" and "this wine," they become the very Real Presence of Christ: in all His perfection, in all His power and in all His love. Every time we approach the altar, whether bodily or spiritually, we are momentarily plucked out of this world and taken to the mountaintop, to encounter Christ directly. Every time we proclaim, "all honor and glory are yours," we then come to this table to partake in them ourselves: to see and hear the dazzling brightness of Christ's glory ... to touch and taste His grace.

And having been transported beyond our own mortal limits into the all-ness of the Divine ... *we are transfigured*. We return to our pews nothing like the people we were when we left them. We descend the peak of this altar ... emerge from this sacrament and back into the world ... wholly transformed by God, forever ... and also again. Holy Communion is nothing less than a transfiguration of our souls. And so, commemorating the Transfiguration twice in a year isn't a redundancy, but rather a reminder that it is what we experience every single Sunday of the entire year.



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