

“Imagining Transfiguration” by Deborah Sokolove



Transfiguration Sunday

February 19, 2023

It seems to me that lately we've been having a long run of very serious sermons, mostly drawn from every crisis that we hear about in the news. It makes my head swim just to remember the latest crisis. Particularly for the last couple weeks, I've barely been able to listen to the news or read the newspaper. I've been too distracted with what is right here in front of me. And while I applaud and cheer for all of you who are filled with passion to address these very real and very

important issues, I confess that a lot of time I want to just run away to some other place or some other time where I can pretend that every day, and every way the world is getting better and better. I don't get to pretend that, but that's what I want.

Right now I'm overwhelmed with helping to make worship at Seekers to continue to be welcoming, nurturing, and engaging; assisting Glen in taking care of his 93-year-old father; meeting the continuing demands of my work with the Doctor of Ministry program at Wesley Theological Seminary; and trying to support various friends as they deal with addiction, grief, poor health (or all three) while also living with my own ongoing physical challenges.

In my yearning for rest and respite, I take comfort from Nadia Bolz-Weber's wise and witty invitation to sanity. In her post "It's All Too Much," on her blog *The Corners*, she says,

I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day. The human heart and spirit were developed to be able to hold, feel and respond to any tragedy, injustice, sorrow or natural disaster that was happening IN OUR VILLAGE.

So my emotional circuit breaker keeps overloading because the hardware was built for an older time.

And yet, when I check social media it feels like there are voices saying "if you aren't talking about, doing something about, performatively posting about ___(fill in the blank)___ then you are an irredeemably callous, privileged, bigot who IS PART OF THE PROBLEM" and when I am someone who

does actually care about human suffering and injustice (someone who feels every picture I see, and story I read) it leaves me feeling like absolute shit. I am left with wondering: am I doing enough, sacrificing enough, giving enough, saying enough about all the horrible things right now to think of myself as a good person and subsequently silence the accusing voice in my head? No. The answer is always no. No I am not. Nor could I. Because no matter what I do the goal of "enough" is just as far as when I started.

https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres?utm_source=substack&utm_campaign=post_embed&utm_medium=web

What Bolz-Weber writes is pretty much how I feel, so today I'm going to do something a little different. I'm going to invite you to look at some pictures of Jesus on a hike with his friends. But first a little background.

On this Sunday in the Christian year, we celebrate what is formally known in some churches as the Feast of the Transfiguration, or, more casually, Transfiguration Sunday. Either way, the scriptures we have just heard suggest a comparison between Moses hiking up a mountain with his assistant Joshua so that God could give him a pair of stone tablets on which were written some rules for the community; and Jesus hiking up a different mountain with three of his friends to have a chat with Moses, Elijah, and God.

As we just heard, the story about Moses receiving what we now call the Ten Commandments tells us that when Moses went up the mountain, the top was surrounded by a thick cloud, and that the people watching from below saw it not as a regular, misty sort of cloud, but rather as a "devouring fire," which was somehow also "the glory of God." In the next seven chapters, God gives Moses some very detailed instructions about making a

tabernacle or Tent of Meeting, creating a priesthood to serve there, and keeping the sabbath. This conversation took over a month, and the people at the base of the mountain began to think that Moses was never coming back, so they decided to worship a golden calf instead of God.

Do you remember how that turned out? God gets mad, Moses gets mad, the stone tablets get smashed, a plague breaks out, and finally Moses goes back up the mountain, carves two more stone tablets for God to write on, and the covenant is renewed with some new rules about how the people are supposed to relate to God and to one another. And when Moses finally comes back down from the mountain top, his face is shining so brightly that he has to cover it with a veil so people can look at him without being blinded.

This whole story would have been very familiar to Jesus and his followers, as well as to the readers of the Gospels, even if they were—like us—a bit fuzzy on some of the details. So when Jesus, Peter, James, and John got to the top of the mountain that they were climbing, and they saw his face shining like the sun and his clothes looking like lighting while he talked with figures that they understood to be Moses and Elijah, it's no wonder that Peter thought about building tents or tabernacles, just as Moses was instructed to create a Tent of Meeting or tabernacle for conversing with God in the wilderness.

So maybe Peter wasn't as foolish as we sometimes make him out to be. Maybe he was just remembering that God told Moses to build a tent, so he thought he should do that, too. I don't know. What I do know is that Peter wanted to capture the moment in which he and the other disciples saw Jesus transfigured. He wanted to remember.

Like Peter, many artists have also tried to remember, or imagine, what it looked and felt like to see Jesus shining like the sun, to hear the voice of God saying "This is my

beloved. Listen to Jesus.”

[for copyright reasons, the images described are not shown. Instead, links to other websites that display them are included at the end of each description]

This image is from the apse mosaic of the Transfiguration from St. Catherine’s monastery on Mount Sinai, in the middle of the Sinai Desert. There might have been some other images earlier, but this is the first one that we know about. Icons are always supposed to have labels, so that you don’t have to guess who is who. In case your Greek is a little shaky, or you can’t read the labels, that’s Moses over there on the left, and Elijah on the right. Below Elijah, the label Yakobos, meaning Jacob, who we in English called James. I have never figured out why. On the other side is John, right underneath Moses. And then, kind of sprawled there on the bottom, that’s Peter.

Apse mosaic of the Transfiguration from Saint Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, 565–66, the earliest version of the Eastern iconography that has remained to the present day https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_of_Jesus_in_Christian_art#/media/File:Saint_Catherine's_Transfiguration.jpg

We can see the same organization of the cast of characters here in this Ethiopian icon from Africa, which looks incredibly modern to me. I actually could not find out when it was made. But it looks very, very modern to me. and very charming. I particularly enjoy the expressive eyes and gestures. Moses and Elijah look so earnest, while the disciples seem to be worried and confused. What is clear is that the Ethiopian and Coptic iconographers follow the same strict rules for icons that those in the Russian and Greek traditions follow, but interpret them in their own way.

Ethiopian Orthodox Transfiguration icon, from the Monastery de Bose, Italy
<https://www.monasterodibose.it/en/prayer/ecumenical-martyrolog>

[y/970-august/2485-august-6](#)

During the Renaissance we start to see a whole different aesthetic, both from those early Greek things, and from the Ethiopian ones. This fresco by Fra Angelico is in cell #6 at the Dominican Convent of San Marco, in Florence. Moses and Elijah are reduced to talking heads. St Dominic stands on one side of the painting, as he is teaching the monks how to pray, or showing them his vision. Across from him, Mary, the mother of Jesus, holds her hands in a position of acceptance, as she is often seen in annunciations

Fra Angelico (1395-1455), The Transfiguration.
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/art/transfiguration-fra-angelico>

As we move farther into the Renaissance, artists like Bellini try to make their images look more and more like real life. I don't call these realistic. I call them illusionistic, because, just like we can't go to that mountain and see what happened, neither could Bellini. But he was genius at making things look like they just you could just go outside and see this.

Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516), The Transfiguration, oil on board, at the Capodimonte Gallery in Naples.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_of_Christ_%28Bellini%29#/media/File:The-Transfiguration-1480-xx-Giovanni-Bellini.JPG

On the other hand, as we get a little bit later, Raphael puts Jesus up in the clouds, no longer even pretending to keep his feet on the ground. All those other people in the painting are a representation of the miracle in which Jesus heals a boy who has fits. In the Gospel according to Mark, this story occurs immediately after the Transfiguration passage, and some commentaries say that this healing is meant to demonstrate the power of faith and prayer.

Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520), The Transfiguration.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_%28Raphael%29#/media/File:Transfiguration_Raphael.jpg

Similarly, Gerard David puts Moses and Elijah in the clouds, while Jesus mostly has his feet on the ground. This painting is one the first one that we've seen in which we have an image of God the Father. In the Orthodox tradition, it was forbidden to paint the First Person of the Trinity, but in the Roman Catholic West, this prohibition was often ignored. As in the Raphael and the Fra Angelico, this painting also has extra figures. In this case, however, rather than the pious Saint and the Blessed Virgin Mary, the people on the right and the left panels here are the donors and their children, those who paid for this painting to be made for their church, now able to behold the Transfiguration eternally.

Gerard David (1460-1523), The Transfiguration, the Church of Our Lady in Bruges..
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:David_Transfiguration_of_Christ.jpg

So the painters keep adding complexities and dramatic effects, as in this painting by one of my favorite, lesser-known, Renaissance artists, Lorenzo Lotto. In another painting by this artist, in which the Angel Gabriel announces the birth of the Holy Child to Mary, there is a terrified cat. I think is just such a great touch, because clearly the cat doesn't understand when the angel says, "Don't be afraid." But no cat here. Just a lot of terrified disciples.

Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1557), The Transfiguration. Oil on panel, 1510-1512.© Pinacoteca comunale di Recanati
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_%28Lotto%29#/media/File:Lorenzo_Lotto_065.jpg

Speaking of dramatic effects, the drama of this painting by Titian goes beyond the frame. It was made to be attached to

pulley that drew it up out of sight on major holy days, so that a special reredos made out of silver would be revealed. Talk about drama, right? So you get the picture.

Titian Vecellio (1490-1576), The Transfiguration, 1560.
<https://aleteia.org/slideshow/moses-elijah-and-jesus-why-are-they-all-together-at-the-transfiguration/5/>

Now that we've done a whirlwind tour of historical painting, we arrive at the more-or-less present day. I'm going to show you some paintings that by artists who are friends (or at least acquaintances) of mine. I actually didn't intend to make this a promo piece for my friends, but when I went looking around the internet for contemporary images of the Transfiguration, this is who showed up.

This first picture is by an artist named James Janknegt. James lives in Texas, and I had the privilege of exhibiting a whole lot of his works. When I was the curator at the Dadian gallery, and I continue to be in correspondence with him. He's an amazing artist, and he places everything in the present. So all the characters are wearing present-day clothes, and they are there on the mountain. Down below it is not just Peter, James, and John – you can kind of see them there in the center, below Jesus. But in the lower corners, approaching the mountain,, these are contemporary people, inviting us to join them in a procession. We, too, get to be present, just like the donors in the Gerard David painting we looked at earlier.

James B Janknegt, Transfiguration, 2001, 40" x 30", oil on canvas, <https://www.bcartfarm.com/pp180.html>

This next painting is an icon by Russian iconographer Philip Davidov, from whom I took a couple of workshops. Philip used to live in St. Petersburg, but now resides in another part of Eastern Europe because of the aggression against Ukraine. He paints in the Russian tradition, and yet, even though he strictly follows the rules of the Russian iconographic

tradition, like the Ethiopian icon we saw earlier, the icons that come from his hand have a new, fresh, different look.

Philip Davydov, Icon of the Transfiguration of Christ, 20" x 16", gold and egg tempera on panel, 2017
https://www.sacredmurals.com/icons_of_christian_feasts/contemporary_icon_transfiguration.html

Laura James is another artist whose work I had the pleasure of showing in the Dadian Gallery. She lives in Brooklyn, and she paints in a modern adaptation of the Ethiopian style. In 2000, she was invited to create the illuminations for a new Book of the Gospels to be used in Roman Catholic churches all over the US. So today, when the story of the Transfiguration is read, many people are seeing this picture.

Laura James, Transfiguration, From *The Book of the Gospels*, 2000,
<https://www.laurajamesart.com/collections/book-of-gospels/>

The next image is a woodcut by Sister Mary Grace Thul. I've never met Sister Mary Grace because she's a cloistered Dominican nun, and she doesn't go out and visit. But I have followed her work ever since I showed some of her pieces in a group exhibition at the Dadian Gallery. She's an amazingly prolific artist who says, "*My goal is to produce art that is contemporary enough to be accessible and widely spread to the people of today. For this I am grateful to God for the opportunities and friends who have made it possible for a cloistered nun to reach out to so many. Art can be prayer. My artwork is my way of living a contemplative life. Art brings me inner peace. I hope my art brings inner peace to the viewer.*"

Transfiguration, Woodcut,
<https://river-gallery.com/artist/sister-mary-grace-thul> .

The next 2 images are by people I don't know, but I was so moved by them when I saw them on the Internet, I just had to

share them with you. Irish artist Peter Howson paints Jesus as glowing, nearly disembodied creature, floating about the ground in an echo of the Raphael we saw earlier, but not as pretty. This Jesus is just a little scary, I think.

Peter Howson, Transfiguration, Giclee print, Christos Aneste painting series
<https://www.flowersgallery.com/artists/167-peter-howson/>

In this vision by Bulgarian artist Piriankov Ventzislav, Jesus is even more ethereal. Here, his glowing body nearly disappears into light, taking up almost the whole space, pushing all the other characters off to the side. I don't know if that's what Jesus really wants to do. But sometimes that's what it feels like—Jesus is the main thing, and our little lives are just our little lives.

Piriankov Ventzislav
Transfiguration <https://marriage-encounter-icon.blogspot.com/2012/11/other-sacral-icon-paintings-by.html?fbclid=IwAR26nPfVro9kLH234mHGbuCRN9-Lss3hyzFn0vmBqSj08XA5bgUImSUUqnA>

Finally, the entire scene becomes abstract as Jan Richardson turns us back to our own imaginations. We often quote Jan's prayers and poetry in the liturgy. In addition to her books and blog posts, Jan is also an amazing artist and an amazing person, who, I've also had the privilege of getting to know when I showed her work, too, at the Dadian Gallery. Now that I think of it, my life has been so full of amazing artists that I am moved to tear. Jan says, *"In my artful work and elsewhere, the challenges that the disciples encounter in this passage from Luke are my own challenges. Like Peter, John, and James at prayer with Jesus on the mountain, I sometimes struggle to stay awake when it's easier to be lulled into sleep and to miss the thin places, the meetings of heaven and earth, that open up in the midst of daily life"*

Jan Richardson, *Transfigure, Collage 2010* © Jan Richardson.
<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/02/07/transfiguration-back-to-the-drawing-board/>

For a little while, we have been in some other time and place, and I, for one, feel refreshed and renewed by these images of the revelation of divine light. I hope that you feel a bit better, too, because now it's time to walk down the mountain, to come back to all those fires that are still burning all over the place. After all, in a few short days the season of Epiphany, of the revelation of the image of God, will be over. On Wednesday, we will mark our foreheads with ashes as a pilgrim sign for our journey through Lent.

As a gift for the journey, I offer once again the voice of God speaking through the prophet Nadia Bolz-Weber. When the glory of God looks like a devouring fire, she reminds us that

1. We are still living through a global pandemic and that means the baseline of anxiety and grief is higher than ever and shared by everyone. 2. The world is on fire literally and metaphorically. But 3. I only have so much water in my bucket to help with the fires. The more exposure I have to the fires I have NO WATER to fight, the more likely I am to get so burned, and inhale so much smoke, that I cannot help anymore with the fires close enough to fight once my bucket is full again.

So I try and tell myself that it's ok to focus on one fire.

It's ok to do what is YOURS to do. Say what's yours to say. Care about what's yours to care about.

And to these three points I would add one more: Take some time to do something fun every day. Because that's how we fill our buckets—with prayer, with meditation, with lunch with our friends, with going for a hike up the mountain, or maybe just a walk around the block, or going to an art gallery, or maybe

sitting on the porch looking at those daffodils that are just about to bloom. Whatever it is that fills your bucket, do it.

You are not taking anything away from anyone else. You are not shirking your duty. You are filling your bucket with the water of life, so that you can bring life to the world. And that's enough. Amen.