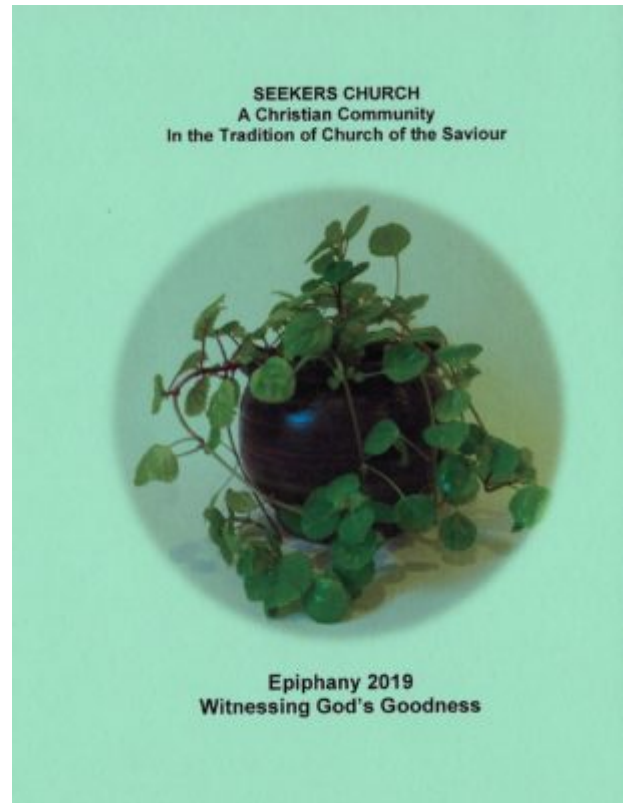


“Transfiguration” by David Lloyd

March 3, 2019



Transfiguration Sunday

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, so my questions to you are, first, “Are you sleepy from keeping the vigil last night?” and second, “Did you bring the grapes or other fruit?” The Feast of the Transfiguration has been celebrated in the Western Catholic Church since the 9th century, Common Era. The date was set as August 6 in the Julian calendar, which is now August 19 in the Gregorian calendar that we follow. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, this Feast is marked by an all-night vigil the night before and by the bringing of grapes to be blessed after the liturgy is over. If grapes aren’t available, apples or other fruit may be brought to be blessed.

This Feast of the Transfiguration is one of the Twelve Great

Feasts of the Orthodox Church and it is viewed as a feast of the Trinity. Why the Trinity? Because all three persons of the Trinity were present: God the Creator in the voice from heaven, God the Son in Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit in the cloud. As a feast of the Trinity, it is a feast of Epiphany and is regarded as the lesser epiphany to the greater epiphany of Jesus' baptism where again all three persons of the Trinity were present. This may account for why Protestant churches observe Transfiguration Sunday as the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany.

The Transfiguration was recorded in the three synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke). There are a few differences between them but they share the essence of the event. Let's look at the Transfiguration in more depth.

The first thing is the timing of the story. The Transfiguration ends the journey of Jesus and the disciples into an area north of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had just asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" and gets the answers, "John the Baptist brought back to life," and "Elijah," and "One of the prophets," and then Peter answered, "The Messiah!" In none of these three gospels does Jesus deny Peter's claim but in all three he told them not tell anyone.

Why? King Herod has just had John the Baptist killed. Laying low from the authorities made sense. Also, the throngs coming to Jesus had come primarily seeking his healing powers. He may have seen this as missing the point of his calling. Or maybe he thought the timing was premature – he would wait until he was in Jerusalem for his status as Messiah to be revealed.

Then Jesus had told them that the Son of Man must suffer and would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the Torah, and he would be killed and on the third day would be raised to life. As if that wasn't enough, he went on to say, "Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves

and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory.” Wow! They thought they knew him, they loved him just the way he was and then he said something like this. That really made them want to continue following him, don't you think? I suspect it was a stunned and quiet group of disciples for the next week as they traveled to this unnamed mountain where he led Peter, James, and John up to experience his Transfiguration. Within a few days after their return down the mountain, he led them on the way to Jerusalem, where his dire predictions came to pass.

The Transfiguration was a mystical event and almost every detail in the gospels' account carries symbolic weight. The unnamed mountain – a common location for a direct encounter with God – a thin place between heaven and earth. The dazzling bright white of Jesus' garments – an echo of the first day of creation, “Let there be light.” The presence of Moses and Elijah – the great figure of liberation for the Jewish people and the greatest of the prophets who saved the people at a critical moment – a sign that Jesus is the savior of the Jewish people. Moreover, Moses had been buried in an unknown location while Elijah had been taken up into heaven by a chariot before death and now here they were with Jesus – God is god of the living, not of the dead.

Moses had heard God in the fire of a burning bush, invoked God's miracles that convinced Pharaoh to free the Israelites, led the people into freedom, and had gone up a different mountain – Sinai – where he received God's commandments to organize and spiritually shape the people in the wilderness. He had been so close to God on Sinai that his face shone and he had to cover it to keep from blinding the Israelites. But

Moses never got to enter the Promised Land.

Elijah had performed miracles and had chided King Ahab and Queen Jezebel for their ethical lapses and worship of false gods. Jezebel – Princess of Baal – zealously tried to convert the people to worshipping Baal but Elijah saved the people's faith in the God of Israel by demonstrating the power of God and the powerlessness of Baal through a miracle on Mount Carmel. Elijah then killed the 450 prophets of Baal. Jezebel was so angry she killed hundreds of God's prophets and tried to kill Elijah, who ran for his life to Mt. Horeb (yet another mountain). There he felt God's presence in the wind, earthquake, and fire and then heard God's voice in the soft murmur. By the time of Jesus, it was widely anticipated that Elijah would appear again to prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah by turning their hearts back to God.

Luke says that Moses and Elijah discussed Jesus' forthcoming departure from the earth in Jerusalem, in Greek, his "exodus." Isn't that interesting? I've often wondered about their conversation. I imagine it went something like this:

Jesus: "I know God wants me to proclaim the kingdom of God in Jerusalem, to show The Way to all the children of Israel. I've already made enemies of the elders and teachers of the Law in Galilee and I'm sure the chief priests will oppose me. I know they will kill me and I pray for the courage to face it. My disciples, who I love so dearly, don't understand. I also believe I will be raised up on the third day. And they don't understand that either."

Moses: "Pharaoh tried to kill me as a baby and again with his army after we left Egypt. Then our own people tried to kill me in the wilderness. God gave courage to me as I stood before Pharaoh and God will give it to you. As for the children of Israel – they never understand, never have faith. I pray for your faith."

Elijah: "Jezebel killed many of God's prophets and tried to kill me. But God was there for me. Be faithful and God will give you the courage you need. Make the people ready for the kingdom of God. Have pity on them because they don't understand. Trust in the Lord."

Then a cloud descended on them and the three disciples heard a voice come from within it, "This is my beloved Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him." The cloud lifted and Moses and Elijah were gone. Luke says that the three disciples told no one. No kidding! How could they talk about this mystical experience they didn't understand themselves, an experience that was a bit frightening? They thought they knew God. They thought they knew Jesus. They loved Jesus just the way he was. And now he had been revealed to be something more, something much more. They recognized him and yet they didn't recognize him.

Doesn't their experience ring true for us? We think God is safely at a distance, and we think we know God and then God meets us through Jesus. Jesus is God's way of communicating with us, more than through the commandments of Moses or the prophecies of Elijah and the prophets. And we find God loves us just as we are.

In a few weeks Jesus led the disciples to Jerusalem, preached the Good News, confronted the religious leaders, was killed by the political authorities, and by his resurrection saved the world. The disciples finally understood the mystery of the Transfiguration a few weeks later, on Pentecost, when they realized it had been a precursor of his Resurrection. And once they understood that, they were transfigured – following their master, they lived out their faith in God by following Jesus' Way more than just obeying the commandments of scripture or the prophets, followed the Jesus Way so faithfully that their families and friends, who loved them just the way they were, hardly recognized them anymore, followed the Jesus Way faithfully even if that led them to

their deaths.

If we dare to be Jesus' followers, dare to be the Body of Christ, then we too may be transfigured. We too may follow Jesus' Way so faithfully that our families and friends hardly recognize us anymore. When our life has been transfigured by God's love in Christ we can leave our self behind, take up the cross, willing to lose our life for his sake and for the sake of the good news of his message. We may dare to follow Jesus' Way even unto death if need be, because death is not the end. We live in and through Christ, the God of the living.

Take a moment and look closely at a few people near you.... Do you love them just the way they are?... Can you see them garbed in white, speaking with Moses and Elijah?... Can you hear God's voice saying that they are beloved?... We might practice looking at each other with the hope of seeing each other transfigured by God's love. If we did this regularly we might build a stronger community of love here in Seekers Church.

The Feast of the Transfiguration has already been prepared and is ready for us to eat, the grapes have been brought and crushed and are ready for us to drink. Let us have joyful hearts for the Feast of the Transfiguration! God loves just the way we are. Let us dare to be transfigured in Christ. And let us dare to go forth to follow Christ's Way.