

I have a confession.

While I may be decent at reading and writing, I am terrible at arithmetic. At first, everything seemed fine. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division all came to me with great ease. Long before middle school, I even conquered fractions! Yet once I got to high school algebra, everything unraveled. My head hurt. I struggled whenever I tried to solve a complicated equation, so much so that math became my worst subject.

Because of my experience with math, I would like to ask for your help on a counting exercise.

Here is my question: how many transfigurations do you think occur in today's readings? More specifically, how many people *change* – either outwardly in terms of appearance or inwardly in terms of disposition?

### **The Easiest Answer First**

Let's start with the obvious, the transfiguration of Moses according to Exodus 34:30. "When Aaron and the Israelites saw Moses," it says, "the skin of his face was shining and [the people] were afraid to come near him."

This instance seems pretty clear. Something about Moses, namely, the skin of his face, had been changed – so much so that it frightened his fellow Israelites.

That's number one.

Next we have the transfiguration of Jesus' appearance according to Luke 9, our Gospel reading for today. "And while he was praying," it says in v. 29, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white."

Here, the transformation in question affects not only Jesus' face; it changes the appearance of his clothes as well. Details aside, this brings us to two transfigurations – one of Moses and one of Jesus.

I'd like us now to take a closer look: do you notice any other transfigurations, albeit directly (as in the case of external appearance) or indirectly (as in the case of internal transformation)? If so, who do you have in mind? How many do you count?

By my estimate, we have not one, not two, not three, but at least *six* possible transfigurations in or related to our three readings for today. Yes, you heard me correctly! Unless my math is wrong, I count six: the transfiguration of Moses, the transfiguration of Jesus plus four others.

In a moment, I will unveil the remaining four. But first, let's explore what the word "transfiguration" means as well as the significance it has in the broader story of Jesus' life and ministry.

### **The Meaning of "Transfiguration"**

The transfiguration is given to an event in Jesus' life where his physical appearance is temporarily changed before three of his followers on a mountaintop (*HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*). Three of the four Gospels feature an account of it. Matthew and Mark describe it using the Greek word *metamorphoō* from which we derive the term metamorphosis in English.

Luke uses a different word in Greek, which means "became different." Either way, something changed with regard to the appearance of Jesus when the disciples had what Matthew 17:9 calls a *vision* of his transfiguration.

Theologically, their vision has special significance. It harkens back to the first five books of the Old Testament we call "the law" as represented by Moses. It also harkens back to another segment of the Old Testament we call "the prophets" as represented by Elijah. This is what the Jews of the first century when Jesus lived would have

understood as the Bible, something equivalent to about 2/3 of the Hebrew Bible as we know it today.

In the Gospel accounts of the transfiguration, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, who talk with Jesus, confirms his continuity with Jewish tradition. It looks back. At the same time, it also looks ahead insofar as it foreshadows the resurrection.

How so?

Remember the description of the resurrection Paul provides in 1 Corinthians 15:51. “We will not all die,” he says, “but we will all be *changed*, in a moment, in a twinkling of any eye” (italics mine).

On the last day of the old creation, our appearance will be transformed when we wake up to new life in the resurrection, something Jesus’ transfiguration glimpses by way of anticipation.

Much like the horizontal beam of the cross, in short, the story of Jesus’ transfiguration points in two directions – first to what God has done in the past, and second in terms of what God promises to do in the ultimate future. Jesus, of course, is at the center.

### **Is Four a Feasible Number?**

Now that we have defined the meaning of transfiguration (change of appearance) as well as its theological implications (it links the past and future in the person of Jesus), we can return to our original question: how many characters in today’s readings are transfigured?

We already know the first two answers: according to the first reading, Moses was transfigured. According to the second, Jesus was transfigured. What about Elijah? We have no story of him being transformed outwardly or inwardly in the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, Luke 9:31 tells us that the disciples saw two men talking with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, who “appeared in glory.” That makes three, but it raises another question: why would he include Elijah in the transfiguration if Elijah had not previously been transfigured?

Who asks these kinds of questions? They are difficult! That said, we have a couple of clues: like Moses, Elijah climbed Mt. Horeb (also known as Sinai) where he encountered God. Also like Moses, the circumstances of Elijah's "death" remain mysterious. Nobody knows where Moses is buried. In Elijah's case, the story goes that he never died!

You remember the account. According to 1 Kings, Elijah was taken up to God in a chariot of fire. He ascends to heaven, a symbol of his special significance. Perhaps this implies his transfiguration since close proximity to God would otherwise result in annihilation, at least as the old thinking goes.

Whatever we think, Luke presents us with three transfigurations – Moses', Elijah's, and Jesus'. Who's next?

A fourth possible transfiguration resides in the person of Peter. You remember him – the disciple who sank into the water apparently due to his lack of faith, the one who denied Jesus three times.

Yet you also know how Peter became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, a man whose faith and humility (according to Catholic tradition) led him to a martyr's death upside-down on the cross. How could any of that happen without Peter experiencing an inner-transformation?

Was not Peter, like Christ, raised even before he died in the courage he must have had to face such a death? If you agree, that makes four. What about a fifth?

Do you ever wonder what happens to God in this story?

Sure, the transfiguration of Jesus offers us a glimpse into the future of humankind; yet it also has been "understood as an instance of Jesus' true form as the Son of God *breaking through* his human form" (*HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*; italics mine). What powerful language! Let's explore it.

If God descends completely and totally into human life as “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14), so much so that God’s glory momentarily becomes visible in the transfiguration, then what happens to God in the process? Is it merely coincidental that this is the last moment in the Jesus story where God stops speaking from above? Or could it be that now God is no longer up there beyond the clouds in “splendid isolation,” but down here, suffering with us in the person of Jesus? That would certainly explain the silence of God above when Jesus dies on the cross, and it would also justify us in speaking of the *metamorphosis* of God.

In Christ, to summarize, God above us has become God among us. The Lord of the Skies, as it were, has become what one philosopher calls our “fellow-sufferer who understands,” the man of sorrows, the suffering servant. Now nothing can separate us from God’s love! If my math is correct, therefore, that leaves us with one remaining transfiguration – ours.

## **We Are Being Transformed**

According to 2 Corinthians 3, our second reading for today, Paul affirms that in Christ, we too “are being transformed into the same image [of God’s glory] from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (v. 18). Here Paul uses the same word we find in Matthew and Mark for transfiguration, *metamorphoō*, which English translations unhelpfully render as “being changed.”

No, no, no: we are being transfigured, only it’s not as obvious as what happens to Jesus!

So, how can we tell? In what way are we “being transformed”?

The answer should come as no surprise: through imperceptible moments of grace where our hearts are slowly changed, such that we no longer simply care about ourselves but for what Paul elsewhere calls “the common good.” It appears when we seek the well-being of

our neighbor instead of simply giving in to our native selfishness, when we live for others instead of only for ourselves.

That is the way God slowly transfigures us on the inside. Martin Luther puts it perfectly: the transformative grace of God is “not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death” (*Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2ed., p. 136).

## **My Math**

I began with a confession today about my poor math skills. In spite of that, however, I stated that I counted up to six possible transfigurations in today’s readings. Now you’ve heard them: Moses, Elijah, Jesus, Peter, God, and us. But here we have a problem. While I’m not good at algebra or calculus, I do know the number six in the Bible has a negative connotation. It represents incompleteness, as evident on the sixth day of creation. God still had to rest to complete what God made.

How, then, can we turn this into seven? You recall what I said about “us” being transformed, how God invites us to be transfigured in our hearts. Well, that’s an easy fix. We get seven if, instead of “us,” we say “you and me.”

So, there you have it: a perfect number, God’s number. Today we’ve learned that there are seven transfigurations associated with today’s readings: Moses’, Elijah’s, Jesus’, Peter’s, God’s, yours, and mine.

How’s that for my arithmetic?

Amen.