

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" – not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. [

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹ Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴² While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ^{43a} And all were astounded at the greatness of God.]

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Grace to you this morning, and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that light and life in the world. Amen.

What does it mean to be transfigured? Is it something that happens merely to Moses and Jesus alone, or can it also happen to each of us? Can we be transfigured, that is transformed, as well?

Exodus, our first reading and Luke, our gospel reading for today, offer a pretty clear answer: no! Moses and Jesus are transfigured. The skin of their face glows. And in the case of Jesus, his clothes become a dazzling white. The other characters in these stories, the Israelites and the disciples remain as they are. Transfiguration, it would seem, happens to Moses and Jesus alone.

Things change, however, when we get to the Apostle Paul, the most widely-read author in the history of Western civilization. In our Second Reading for today, Paul speaks of the Transfiguration figuratively, or metaphorically. The people of the Old

Covenant – and covenant here means contractual relationship, the One God establishes with the people of Israel through the Law – the people of the Old Covenant, Paul says, the Israelites who continue to follow the commandments without regard for Christ, “wear a veil over their minds,” whenever Moses, that is the Law, is read. They cannot see the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ, and so they simply continue to live in their old ways. Only by turning to Christ can one “lift the veil,” as it were, and see the glory of God reflected, not in the face of Moses, but in the face of Christ Himself.

Seeing the glory of God reflected in the face of Christ has, in turn, an effect on us, according to Paul. Through it, he says, we are being transformed into the same image of God we see in Jesus Christ, from one degree of glory to the next, thanks to the work of the Lord and the Holy Spirit.

Now I have to say, I like what Paul is doing here. Instead of relegating Transfiguration, or transformation, to Moses or Jesus alone, he applies it to each of us by affirming that we, too, can be inwardly transfigured.

But I also find Paul here to be deeply problematic. Why? Because he sets a dangerous precedent in our Second Reading for today, by suggesting that the glory of God in Christ is somehow *superior* to what we see in Moses.

The old way, the Jewish way, has ostensibly been surpassed. *Only through Christ*, the one through whom God has established a *new* covenant with humanity, are we being transfigured or transformed into the image of God, according to Paul. *Only through Christ*, as Peter says in Acts 5, are we being rescued or saved – presumably not from hell, but from death or annihilation. And *only through Christ*, as Paul says later in the same letter, are we being reconciled, along with the rest of the world, to God.

Now the problem with this way of thinking should be clear. Historically, it has been used as justification for persecuting the Jewish people. God, this forerunner of anti-Semitism implies, has replaced Israel with the Church; Moses, with Jesus; the Jew, with the Christian.

Thankfully, Second Corinthians is not Paul’s last word on the subject. In Romans 11, Paul clarifies that God *has not rejected his people, the Israelites*. God continues to bind Godself to the people of the Covenant, to the Israelites.

That does not mean that God blesses or endorses whatever Israel does. The prophets in the Hebrew Bible make that clear. It does, however, put us, as Christians, in our rightful place. As Paul says, “We were grafted like a branch onto the tree of Israel.” We are, as the theologian Karl Barth says, “honorary Jews.” (love that.) Our fear, accordingly, should never be, as neo-Nazis chanted several years ago in Charlottesville, Virginia, that the Jews will somehow replace us. *Our* mantra should always be, “*we will not replace the Jews.*” God made an everlasting covenant with the people of Israel, and God, as God, does not revoke a covenant. God, in short, keeps God’s promises.

Now, the fancy term for this idea, that God has replaced Israel with the church, is “supersessionism.” (That will be on the exam later, so be sure to take a note of it.)

That is the potential problem we see in Second Corinthians, our Second Reading for today. (There, for those of you who are visiting, will be no exam or quiz. Not to worry.)

That is the potential problem in Second Corinthians. But I also see great promise there as well, for here, as I mentioned earlier, Paul extends the possibility of being *inwardly* transfigured to *each one of us*, including me. By glorifying Christ, Paul says, God, through Him, will glorify each of us. In fact, that glorification, that transfiguration, that transformation, has already begun, again, albeit *inwardly*.

Through Christ, we are *being* transformed. Through Christ, we are *being* saved. Through Christ, we are *being* reconciled to God, as Paul says in Second Corinthians, and again, Peter says in the book of Acts. Such language, we discover, offers an alternative to talk about being “born again,” or “deciding for Jesus.” According to the New Testament, transfiguration is typically *not* something that happens to us instantaneously when we “accept Jesus as our Lord and personal Savior” – the words of which *never* appear in all 27 books of the New Testament. Transfiguration, again, internal transformation, occurs, rather, as a lifelong process whereby God gradually turns us back to God, and outward to our neighbor – making us, at our worst moments, hopefully, less of a jerk.

This lifelong process is one that is gradual, where we find ourselves attending to the needs of others, slowly over time, instead of simply ourselves. It is like the way a flower *slowly* opens its petals to receive the life-giving light of the sun. Martin Luther describes it perfectly when he says, God’s healing grace “is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end, through death.”

God, like the flower mentioned, wants us to bloom. A second-century theologian says “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.” That process, however, takes time.

So. There are two things I want you to think about this morning. First, if you have ever felt judged, or even envious of people who talk about how they were saved instantaneously by accepting Jesus as their Lord and personal Savior, then remember what the Bible actually says. It’s not that “once upon a time” you were saved.

It’s that, from one degree of glory to the next, you are *being* saved. (Present progressive.) You are *being* healed. (Present progressive.) You are *being* transfigured. You are *being* transformed. You are, in short, a work in progress, as am I.

Healing – that is the turning of the human being, from being inwardly focused, outward toward the neighbor and God – healing takes time.

That’s the first thing I want you to think about.

The second thing to think about is this: I want you to look at your own life and ask, “In what ways is the Spirit healing or transforming *me*?” Is it by giving more of your time, your talent, or your treasures to organizations that help people, like Lutheran

World Relief, like Lutheran Disaster Relief, or locally, like Queen Anne Helpline? And yes, of course, indeed, Queen Anne Lutheran Church? (That's my stewardship sermon in a nutshell.)

Or is it the increasing amount of courage you have to stand up for justice, to protest in the name of God's grace, mercy and justice in Christ? If not, in what other ways do you see yourself, slowly, gradually, imperceptibly being transformed?

Of course, there are days where we feel stuck in a rut, where being transformed is as far from the truth as we can imagine. There are days, as the theologian Paul Tillich says, "where the longed-for perfection does not appear; when old compulsions reign within us, as they have for decades; when despair destroys all joy and courage."

When this happens, as it inevitably will, there is one thing you can do: Ask God for help.

Ask God to enable you to be more generous.

Ask God to empower you to work for justice.

Ask God to enable you to be more kind.

Ask God, as David does in the Psalm, to create in you a clean heart and renew a right spirit within you.

Ask God to be transformed.

Ask God to be transfigured.

Ask God to be healed.

Your face might not glow; your clothes, (unlike mine), may not become a dazzling white, but inwardly, subtly, imperceptibly, gradually, the Christian faith teaches that *you are being changed*. That my friends, is the real meaning of Transfiguration: a slow and gradual process, but one available to us all.

Amen.