

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

This story always makes me think about the difference between transfiguration and transformation...two words that often get confused in our minds. The actual definitions are as follows:

Transfiguration – a change in outward form or appearance; to change so as to glorify or exalt.

Transformation – to make a thorough or dramatic change in the form or character of something or someone.

In contemplating just the words, it seems that if we are fortunate and receptive, transfiguration (the way things look) could reflect a transformation into something or someone different, somehow closer to God's dream for us.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, on a high mountaintop. Suddenly, Jesus is transfigured—changed in appearance, becoming "dazzlingly white" Then Moses, and prophet Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. I don't know if there are words to describe how overwhelming, terrifying and incomprehensible this must have been. It comes as no surprise that our outspoken brother, Peter, blurts out a suggestion that they build dwellings and stay right where they are. After all, who wouldn't like to stay in exalted company, just a few chosen people, in an amazing and beautiful place? Who would willingly turn away and face clamoring crowds, the endless human brokenness and need that waited in the valley?

Instead, after another brief and frightening moment of the disciples hearing God's voice—Jesus tells his disciples to keep this all to themselves, then turns and leads them down the mountain and back to the work in the lowlands.

Writer and pastor Rev. Keith Anderson says this: *After his transfiguration, he quickly heads down the mountain and to the cross. In doing so, Jesus rejects the "whiteness" of the Transfiguration and presses into the sea of human need-humanity in all its diversity and fullness-by descending the mountain and setting his face toward the Jerusalem. Jesus constantly refuses the way of privilege, even though he was entitled to every possible privilege as God's beloved Son. And he nailed that privilege to the cross for the sake of the poor, the weak, the disenfranchised, for us all. Jesus may have transfigured on the mountain, but he and the disciples and the crowds were transformed in the valley.*

Mountaintop, or special encounters with the Divine, do occur – they are uplifting and nourishing and very often life-changing. In nature, in music, in the first touch of a newborn’s head, in falling in love or having a perfect, silent revelation of God’s presence – these can all happen and do happen and are miraculous. But the true work of transformation begins after the mountaintop, in the valley of life’s complexities and difficulties.

Transformation most often happens when we are working hard and developing new ways of being. Maybe our hands are dirty, our eyes are tired, we are trying to listen to someone who disagrees with us or causes us pain. Maybe we are sitting in silent meditation but feeling that nothing is happening. Maybe we are forced to make a change we don’t love, but make that change so that others may be served or helped.

Lutheran pastor David E. Leininger says something I really like about our faith communities.

Remember where your work is. The valley. The church is the only institution I know of that exists primarily for the sake of those outside it.

The work of transformation happens in the valleys, outside the church building, not in the transfiguring mountaintop experiences. In the New Testament, the Greek word for transformation is metamorphosis. The definition of *metamorphosis* is “a profound change in form from one stage to the next in the life history of an organism, as from the caterpillar to the pupa and from the pupa to the adult butterfly.”

A caterpillar is born already possessing the life that will cause it to become a butterfly. Although an outward change does occur during metamorphosis, it’s the result of an organic change from within. This kind of change is what is needed in many places, many situations that could be made whole in transforming from within. Groups as well as individuals can initiate this kind of change, and even if there is resistance to this change there is often wonderful growth and health as well.

An example of how an individual can change the appearance and then the function of a community or society is in the story of Absalom Jones. Yesterday was his feast day; on this day, we celebrate a man who was born a slave in 1746, and who used the Bible to teach himself how to read. Over his lifetime, he was transformed from slave into one of the founders of the black Episcopal church in America. This most definitely transfigured the “look” of the Episcopal church – made it no longer an all-white organization.

St. Thomas Church, founded by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, may have been the first independent black organization in the United States. This congregation stepped up to provide economic and medical aid to African Americans transitioning from slavery to freedom. It also sought to strengthen ties between blacks in the United States and those in Africa. The way that parish changed its appearance and function is a testament to courage and faith.

We have to admit that the wider church and certainly the Episcopal church has long been attached to how things look – from the building’s façade to vestments and bulletins and artwork. Sometimes these things are central to bringing folks together in worship, and there is comfort in consistency and sameness. However, now as in the 18th century, flexibility in the look of the church as well as its function seems of great importance in our ability to truly follow the teachings of Jesus. I believe we are standing in a place of metamorphosis.

For those of us who have been attending this parish for years, a walk around the grounds will bring home this truth – **change in appearance reflects change and growth in function and purpose.**

Where there was once just a large hedge and field outside the doors, there is now a pathway between this worship space and an expansive outdoor space that invites new and inclusive ways to be together. Where there was once an empty field with stumps, puddles and a few decrepit tires to play on, there is now a beautiful and much used labyrinth, inviting anyone who comes by to walk and reflect. We have a beautiful playground and seed garden and food forest, and today we will break ground on a café to broaden the way we host and connect with our local community. The transfiguration, the change in St. Stephen’s appearance reflects a transformation in how we hope to see and serve ourselves and others. It speaks to our call to be the Church in the world, to really and truly be followers of Jesus’ word and teaching.

The ‘mountaintop’ experiences, those ways of seeing the dazzling and divine presence of God, are most definitely sources of energy and hope and clarity. We need them as we make changes and turn ourselves outward to the community. Without the mountaintop vision, we might not be able to see and know who leads us, what we are to do next.

We need the transfiguration as much as we need the transformation – and we need to weave them together in our spiritual lives.

To close, I’d like to read a verse from a song by Noel Paul Stookey, known also as Paul in the group Peter, Paul and Mary. He wrote this in 1971:

*And I was wondering if you had been to the mountain
To look at the valley below?
Did you see all the roads tangled down in the valley?
Did you know which way to go?
Oh the mountain stream runs pure and clear
And I wish to my soul I could always be here
But there’s a reason for living way down in the valley
That only the mountain knows.*