

Sunday, September 8, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Matthew 3:13-17
Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration/Transformation of Jesus

Who is Jesus? That's one of *the* questions of our faith, right? Who is Jesus? Fortunately for us, we have multiple perspectives to help us try to answer that question—Paul, the gospel writers, and other authors of the New Testament books. The other fortunate thing for us is that this is exactly the question that the authors of the gospels were attempting to answer—who did they understand Jesus to be and how were they going to share that information with the world?

This is especially true of the gospel of Luke. As he has authored his gospel, the narrative focus is on the identity of Jesus. From the baptism of Jesus, to Herod asking, “Who is this?” to Jesus asking the disciples “Who do you say that I am?” and now to the transfiguration—the focus has been on asking and then answering the question: who is Jesus? Diane Chen, professor of New Testament, explains:

Speculations about who Jesus is have been brewing throughout his Galilean ministry.

That Jesus is the Son of God and Davidic Messiah is a fact revealed to a select few in the infancy narratives. Most people know Jesus as Joseph's son and they wonder if he is also a prophet, a teacher, or a healer exorcist. His detractors label him as a blasphemer and a friend of sinners and tax collectors. Even John the Baptist has to ask if Jesus is the one who is to come. Therefore, when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter's answer, “The Messiah of God,” is perceptive. Even so, Jesus' disciples have yet to embrace the counterintuitive mission of God's Messiah. Given this context, the event of the transfiguration authoritatively answers the question of Jesus' identity and mission.

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(*Connections, Year C, Vol. 1*, Ed. Joel B. Green et. al., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2018. 312-313)

The transfiguration authoritatively answers the question: who is Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God, the Chosen One, and we are to listen to him.

This event in the life of Jesus is often compared to his baptism—for there are a number of similarities between the stories. People watching. Jesus changing—going under the water; in appearance. A voice from heaven. Yet, as J. Paul Rajashekar points out, there is a significant difference. He writes:

The difference between the baptismal revelation and the transfiguration is that the former is addressed *to* Jesus and the latter is a testimony *about* Jesus directed to the disciples.

The intense private experience of baptism finds a public affirmation in the transfiguration narrative. The transfiguration story thus represents a decisive validation of the identity and vocation of Jesus, confirming Peter’s impromptu declaration of Jesus’ messiahship.

(*Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1*, Ed. Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2014. 266, 268)

The transfiguration is not about what happens to Jesus in those moments, but about how what happens reveals Jesus’ identity to the disciples.

So, how does that happen? First, his face changes, his appearance changes, and it’s almost as if he glows. And remember, Jesus is not the first person to glow in Scripture. In Exodus 34 we learn of how Moses was up on the mountain with God and when he came back down to the people, his face shown (it glowed) from having been in God’s presence. The difference, though, between Moses and Jesus, is “that the glow on Moses’ face did not originate from his own glory. It was derived from or reflected off the glory of God when Moses met with

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God...Jesus' glory is the heavenly glory inherent in his divine identity, now revealed to those who believe in him" (*Connections, Year C, Vol. 1*, Ed. Joel B. Green et. al., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2018. 313). So, the full glory of Jesus is being revealed.

But the transfiguration does even more than that—it also “grounds Jesus’ identity firmly in continuity with faithful Israel” (*Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1*, Ed. Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2014. 266, 266), as Moses and Elijah appear beside him. Jeffery Tribble Sr., explains:

Moses is a figure that reminds us of the past: the exodus event and the communal responsibility to teach the statutes and ordinances given to Moses at Horeb. Horeb is also known as Mount Sinai, where God appeared to both Moses and Elijah. Elijah is the prophet who will one day turn people’s hearts back to the covenant. Thus, in Jewish thought, Elijah is associated with the end times. Both of these revered leaders talk with Jesus about his “departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” So we might say that in the transfiguration event Jesus is clear about his mission, which continues the redemptive work of God from the exodus through the end times. (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, Eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2009. 454)

This is all part of God’s work in the world—from the exodus, through the life of Jesus, and his death and resurrection, and until he comes again, and the kingdom of God is established.

But the revelations to the disciples are not over yet as we come to the central one of the passage. A cloud comes over them, it overshadows them, and the disciples are said to enter (or perhaps end up in) the middle of the cloud where they hear a voice saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” It reminds us of the words spoken at the baptism of Jesus, once again

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answering the question of who Jesus is. Still, there are, once again, some differences between Jesus' baptism and this event. Allen McSween Junior explains: "The divine voice echoes the words spoken by God at the baptism of Jesus. In Luke's baptismal narrative, the voice of God is addressed primarily to Jesus, 'You are my Son, the Beloved.' Here the divine voice addresses the disciples as well, 'This is my Son, my Chosen.'" (*Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1*, Ed. Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2014. 271)

So, we are able to see, how once again, the focus on the transfiguration is revealing the identity of Jesus to the disciples.

For that is the question Luke has been working to answer throughout his gospel: who is Jesus? What is the identity of this person called Jesus? What we see is that the transfiguration episode decisively resolves and reaffirms the identity of Jesus as the bearer of God's kingdom. It provides a glimpse or a foretaste of the prediction that Jesus will not only suffer and be put to death, but that will not be the end of the story. It also points to his vindication and eventual glorification by being welcomed into the select company of Moses and Elijah. The story anticipates a future of a glorious and victorious Lord as the resurrected Christ... (Ibid., 270).

So, at the end of the day, while the transfiguration was about Jesus, it wasn't necessarily for Jesus. It was an affirmation, an assurance, for the disciples, and for us, of who Jesus is and how we are to listen to him. So, if someone asks you, "who is Jesus?" you can point them to the transfiguration as an answer to the question.

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