

*Resistance and Transformation, Part 1*

A Sermon on Matthew 17:1-9 by the Rev. Philip Major

St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ The Feast of the Transfiguration ~ February 15, 2026

Each year at this time, when the Season after Epiphany is ending and the Season of Lent is about to begin, we read about two of the most unusual episodes in Jesus' life in quick succession. The stories are the story of the Temptation of Jesus, which we'll read next week, and the story of the Transfiguration, which we read today. These two passages remind me of stories you might find in a comic book or a graphic novel. The scenery is dramatic. The characters are not everyday characters. The action is mysterious and powerful.

These two stories enhance one another like the shirt and the pants in your favorite outfit. They are different, but the fabrics and colors work together. The ideas in the stories lead us in different directions, but they complement one another. So I want to encourage us to read these two stories as a pair, and to consider the ideas in the stories in relationship to one another.

Next Sunday's Gospel passage is the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. The temptation of Jesus is a story about not being pushed away from what is most important in your life. The story of the temptation of Jesus is a story about resistance.

The temptation of Jesus reminds us stay rooted in the love and grace of God, and to not be deceived by false promises of power or prestige. As Jesus' disciples we are holding onto something God has given us. We hold onto the desire to love our neighbors. We hold onto the desire to serve God by serving our neighbors. This is a conservative movement in us, as Jesus' disciples. We are conserving something that is essential for us as Christians. We'll think more about this conservative direction when we read the story of the temptation of Jesus next week.

Today, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, let's give our attention to the second, opposite direction for us, as Jesus' disciples. It's the direction of transformation. Jesus' disciples need to let go of something that is keeping us from doing God's will. We need to let ourselves be changed. This is the idea that runs through today's Gospel passage.

We are following Jesus, and Jesus let himself be changed. Jesus let go of some part of himself. *Jesus took three of his disciples and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

We can't understand exactly what was happening up on the mountain. Sometimes when we are trying to make sense of difficult or unexpected events, we end up saying unhelpful things. Peter took a quick look at the situation and thought he understood what was happening.

Peter said, *"Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."* While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, *"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"* When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

The story of the Transfiguration is mostly about a change in Jesus, but it is also a story about the need for the disciples to be changed. Peter is like me. Peter likes to talk. Peter always has something to say. The possibilities for Peter to be changed are obvious. Peter could let go of his need to always have some sort of response for every situation.

It's more difficult to understand the transformation that was happening in Jesus. Jesus was a real, human being. Sometimes I forget that, since Jesus was a real human being, he also had behaviors, thoughts and feelings that were distracting him from his true purpose in life. Since Jesus was a real human being, he needed to let himself to be changed. Jesus needed to let himself be changed so would be able to do more of God's work.

How was Jesus changed? What did Jesus let go of? We can't be sure of the whole answer. We know the ending part of the answer. We know Jesus was willing to let go of his life. Jesus was willing to give up his life for the sake of God's people.

But the part of the story where Jesus gives up his life for God's people was just one chapter of his story, and it came near the end. There were other changes that had to happen in Jesus, in order for the big changes to happen at the end. There were smaller, more subtle ways Jesus was changed long before the events of Holy Week.

I want us to pay attention to these smaller, subtler changes in Jesus, because this is what we need to pay attention to in ourselves. Most of us are not going to undergo a Holy Week type transformation in our lives, the way Jesus did. But all of us need to be transformed, the way Jesus was. Let's pay attention to the smaller ways God is inviting us to be changed. Let's consider these opportunities for transformation in us, by recalling three episodes in Jesus' life.

You might recall there was a time in Jesus' life when he lashed out in anger. Preachers call this episode "The Temple Tantrum". You probably remember the story. Jesus was very upset, and rightfully so, about the people turning the Temple into a market place. Jesus was angry. Let's consider that it was probably important for Jesus to be able to let go of some of the anger in him, in order for him to do more of God's work.

The anger in Jesus was part of the story, but it wasn't the most important part of the story. The same thing is true in your life. Jesus let himself be changed, perhaps by setting aside his anger. You and I can also be changed to do more of God's work. We can let God help us set aside our anger, so we can do the most important things.

You might recall there were times in Jesus' life when he was overwhelmed with sorrow. One of these times happened when he went to the home of Mary and Martha and visited the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Jesus wept. Since he was a real human being, Jesus had many feelings at the tomb of Lazarus, perhaps feelings of grief, feelings of guilt, or even feelings of shame.

The feelings of sorrow and shame in Jesus were part of the story, but they weren't the important parts of the story. The same thing is true in your life. The feelings and thoughts and actions of sorrow, shame and guilt we carry are not the most important parts of our lives. Like Jesus, we have to be willing to let ourselves be changed. Like Jesus, we have to let go of the sorrow, shame, and guilt we carry in order to do more of God's work.

You might recall there were times in Jesus' life when he was overwhelmed with fear. One of these occasions is familiar to us because we read the story of Jesus being afraid each year at Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane with eleven of the disciples to pray. The disciples were exhausted and kept falling asleep. Jesus was terrified. He was filled with fear.

The feelings of fear in Jesus were part of the story, but they weren't the important parts of the story. Jesus had to let go of the fear inside him in order to do God's work. The same thing is true in your life.

The emotions we feel are important. We feel angry, or afraid, or sorrowful in response to real events we have experienced in our lives. But these negative emotions can also keep us from becoming more of what God created us to be: God's children, embracing the joy and love God intends for our lives.

The feelings of sorrow and shame, the feelings of anger and fear are not the most important parts of our lives. Like Jesus, there is a part of our behaviors, a part of our feelings, a part of our thoughts, that are distracting us from what is most important. Like Jesus, we have to let go of the sorrow and shame, we have to let go of the anger and fear we are carrying, in order to live fully in the love and grace of God.

About 90 years ago, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prayer that many of us have heard. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." With these two stories of Jesus in our minds, let's use Niebuhr's example, and create a prayer for discernment in our own lives. God, grant us grace to let go of parts of our lives that are keeping us from you, grant us strength to hold onto parts of our lives that draw us closer to you, and wisdom to know the difference.