

Can Humanity Be Transformed?

Luke 9:28-36

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Right smack in the middle of Luke's gospel, in the midst of feeding the five thousand and sending the twelve out on mission, just after Peter has said that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus responded by saying that he was going to be killed and then be raised—just then Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray. It seems to be “the” mountain because it is the mountain of God. It is a thin place, as the Celtic Christians say, one of those places where heaven and earth intersect. And there as Jesus prays while his three students sleep, Jesus' face is changed and he begins to shine with the very glory of God, that *shekinah* that Moses encountered on the mountain of God which made his face radiant, and this light is so intense that looking at Jesus' clothes is like looking at the sun.

What's going on here? Nothing like this has ever happened to Jesus—and even when he's resurrected Jesus doesn't shine like this. This is the one chance these three disciples have to see Jesus as he really is—as he will be when he is ascended and as he is eternally, beyond this time-space box we live in. This is kind of a sneak preview, or like that TV series that didn't quite make it last year, a “flash forward.” Maybe Becca's forced me to watch too many sci fi shows, but this episode reminds me of stories in which time becomes fluid and doubles back on itself so that we see the end of the story in the middle. For God, in the eternal realm, time is all one, everything is now, so perhaps it makes sense that that we can have flash-forwards, seeing the future now as God sees it.

The Jesus that Peter and the others see is the same Jesus who appears to John the elder in the first chapter of Revelation: “In the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force” (1:13-16 NRSV). That's the Risen Christ, the eternal Jesus, the Lamb who sits on the throne with the Father, the *Lord* Jesus, the antidote to “gentle Jesus meek and mild.” The One that Peter sees on the mountain shining is the One we will see in heaven, the One we worship every Sunday, the One who shines his light into our darkness.

The disciples look up from their sleep and see Jesus, radiant, standing with two other shining figures whom they recognize somehow as Moses and Elijah. Moses had spoken face to face with God many times until his face glowed and Elijah heard from God frequently until he was taken up in a chariot of fire. Both of them had confronted political power with the power of God. They are talking to Jesus. What do you think they are saying? Probably something like “You can do it! Stick to your mission!” Luke says that they were talking to Jesus about his *exodus*. That's the word in Greek; I can't imagine why you need to translate it as “departure.” His exodus means that they are indeed talking about his exit strategy, but the word exodus combined with Moses means that in leaving he is leading his people to salvation. Moses and Elijah are talking to Jesus about his exodus which was about to be *accomplished* in Jerusalem. What's going to happen in Jerusalem? Jesus just told his disciples that he will be rejected and

killed and then raised. Through his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus will bring people out of slavery and into freedom. “Don’t give up,” they are saying. “Stay on the path.”

Peter sees Jesus with Moses and Elijah and thinks he is seeing the Big Three. Let’s build three little shrines right here for the three of you. Luke said he didn’t know what he was saying. He was being dumb. Just then a cloud comes, the cloud of God’s presence, and it overshadows them—you might remember that funny word “overshadow” from the first chapter of Luke, where Gabriel says to Mary that the Spirit will overshadow her. Here comes that same Spirit in the form of a cloud and the voice of God says, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And then there was only Jesus, only one to worship, not the Big Three but the Only One.

God says “Listen to him.” What has Jesus been saying that we are supposed to listen to? If you look back through the gospel at this point you can only find one stretch of preaching, what is often called “the sermon on the plain” in chapter 6 (20-49). What does Jesus say? Here’s a summary:

- Blessed are you poor; woe to you rich.
- Love your enemies (he says it twice) and respond without violence.
- Give to beggars and to thieves.
- Treat others as you would want them to treat you.
- Be merciful because God is merciful.
- Do not judge, but forgive.

Then Jesus asks a question: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not *do* what I tell you?” Now the voice of God says “Listen to him. Do what he tells you.” Are we doing those things—blessing the poor, loving our enemies, being nonviolent, forgiving rather than judging? If we were doing those things, the world would be a different place. Those things represent a new way of being human that leaves the law of the jungle behind, that leaves “tit for tat” theology and politics behind. That new way of being human has now been endorsed by God himself, speaking out of a cloud.

It has become clear to me that when we see Jesus as he really is, radiant with glory, we are seeing more than that. When we look at that Jesus, the eternal Jesus, the eventual Jesus beyond the cross, we are seeing our destiny. We are seeing in that shining person the goal of our transformation. This is what God wants for us his children, his chosen ones, brothers and sisters of Jesus. God wants us to become like him, to share that glory. 1 John 3:2 says that when we see him as he really is, we will become like him. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says that “all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord [Jesus] as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Don’t you love that verb—*are being transformed*? It is happening already now, and it will be complete one day: we will be like Jesus. The image of God will be restored in us and the damage that sin has done to us will be undone. We will be fully human in that day, and being fully human means to be like Jesus. Some day we will be radiant like that, radiant with mercy, radiant with love even for our enemies. That is the great hope that is revealed to us in the Transfiguration.

But the human race has by and large said no to that hope. By and large we humans do not want to be changed. We do not want to be like Jesus. We would rather be like Caesar. We’d rather be Samson or Goliath or David on the warpath. We want to be winners rather than losers. And in the real world all that talk about loving enemies and nonviolence and showing mercy gets dismissed as unrealistic at best and treasonous at worst—treasonous because it denies that humans are expendable as victims of *jihad*, denies that the natural order of things is to sacrifice humans to the god of the nation-state.

The Jesus revealed in the Transfiguration, revealed in this table as flesh and blood given for us and our forgiveness even though we were his enemies, stands against all of that and offers the only real hope for the human race. The Feast of the Transfiguration was set many centuries ago on August 6. 65 years ago August 6 became memorable for another reason, another reason that also had to do with a blinding light and a terrifying cloud. 65 years ago we dropped the first atom bomb on civilians in the city of Hiroshima. It was not some evil nation who did it, not terrorists or jihadists; it was us, the allegedly Christian nation rationalizing the murder of civilians in violation of every ethical guideline ever developed for the prosecution of a war.

On the day when Christians around the world—and certainly the many Catholics in Nagasaki—were celebrating the feast of the Transfiguration, thinking about the new hope that Jesus gave to the human race, trying in their small communities to live out a new way of being human, we dropped a then-experimental bomb in the middle of a city full of women, children, men, and animals, and in minutes took 140,000 lives, eventually many more than that. It was the military equivalent of more than 45 World Trade Centers collapsing at once and the Ground Zero in this case was more than four square miles of absolutely nothing but ash. Beyond that, nine square miles of charred remains. The Catholic activist Dorothy Day called the bombing of Hiroshima “the anti-transfiguration,” the opposite of what happened on the mountain of God: the revealing of the worst of what humanity could become rather than the best.

I’ve heard all the arguments explaining why it was necessary to take lives to save lives, why over 8 months of 1945 it was necessary to incinerate one million civilians in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Tokyo, Dresden, and Hamburg. We weigh our one million against millions killed by the Germans and Japanese, and feel justified. Tell that to Jesus. Why do you say Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say? At the very minimum, loving your enemies means not killing them. Loving your neighbors means not burning them to a crisp.

There is a new way to be human that Jesus offers to us—not only by teaching us but by sharing his very life with us, by placing his Spirit in our bodies as a transforming presence, beginning even now to restore in us the image of God so that we become more and more like Jesus himself. He offers forgiveness and new life to Americans and Japanese equally.

As most of you know, my parents were missionaries in Japan beginning in 1949. I never heard them criticize the bombing of Hiroshima. That’s on me, not them. But my mother used to tell the story of a young tailor from Hiroshima who worked in a shop with his sister. He was out of town making deliveries the day the atom bomb fell, but from miles away he could see the flash of light and the smoke of many fires. It took the young man three days to make his way across the city through unimaginable terror until he found what he surmised to be his neighborhood; it was hard to tell. He could not find his shop or his home. The dead and dying were all around, and the young tailor wandered from body to body looking for his sister. At last he heard a weak voice call his name. He looked down at a naked body he did not recognize and saw the print of his sister’s dress burned into that helpless pile of flesh. With great effort she whispered to her brother, “I hate them. I hate the Americans.” As she died, he swore to himself, “I too will hate them as long as I live.”

The young man began to work in a tailor’s shop, repairing clothes and piecing together what cloth was available. His co-worker was a member of a Christian church. “Why don’t you come with me?” he asked. “We only have three walls standing and have found only eleven members still living, but the pastor is alive and we still sing and it does us good.” The young tailor asked, “Isn’t that the religion of the Americans?” “Yes, of some of them.” “Then I will have nothing to do with it.”

As time passed, the young tailor was consumed with his anger and unable to move ahead with his life. He became despairing and sought help from his Christian friend. "Why don't you just come to the church and listen to the music? You can leave before the sermon." The sad young man agreed to that (as many of you might). He liked the music, the tempo of hope, the melody of hearts set free. It began to work on him, so one night he stayed to hear the evangelistic message. The message of a personal and forgiving Father spoke to the center of his rage and despair.

The young tailor blurted out to the pastor, "I want him for my Father, too!" The pastor reassured him, "He wants to be Father of us all." The tailor stopped and grew still, remembering, trembling. "Is he the Father of the Americans, too?" The pastor replied, "Of many Americans, yes." The struggle going on inside the young tailor was evident as he stood there. Finally, a smile broke across his face. He said to the pastor, "If we have the same Father, then we must be brothers!"

Can forgiveness change the world? Can humanity be transformed? Jesus offers us a new way to be human. His radiance is the destiny to which we are called. Let us acknowledge him as Lord and do what he says.