

Introductory

This incident has parallel accounts in Matthew (16:21-28) and Mark (9: 2-13). John does not specifically relate the Transfiguration, but he sure talks a lot about Jesus as the “light.” The synoptic accounts are very similar, but as is often the case, all three add information that the others leave out.

The Matthew text is appointed to be read on Transfiguration in the TLH one-year lectionary, and the Matthew, Mark, and Luke texts are appointed for Series A, B, and C respectively in the LW and LSB three-year lectionaries. Transfiguration marks the end of the Epiphany Season and the approach of Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent.

The Baptism of Jesus at the beginning of this season and His Transfiguration at the end of it serve as bookends to the Epiphany Season. In both places, as well as the Epiphany Sundays in between, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God. Here and at His Baptism we have a visual; first the dove and now the cloud.

In both places the voice of the Father is distinctly heard with the ear, and the voice is revealing something very important about Jesus; that He is His Son and that the Father “well pleased” with the Son. Moses and Elijah were big deals, and Peter, James, and John were destined to become big deals in their own right, but none of them are Jesus.

When Jesus went up on the mountain, He took Peter, James and John with Him. Peter remembers the incident well and specifically refers to it in his second epistle, which used to be the appointed epistle text for this day. His take on the Transfiguration, as an eyewitness to the event, is instructive and interesting

The atheist Scotsman David Hume invented Experiential Philosophy. For Hume, if he could not perceive something with his senses, then the thing did not happen. He was unable to observe a person walking on water, and in fact his observations taught him the opposite, so he did not believe that Jesus really walked on water.

Thousands of misguided college and seminary teachers and hundreds of commentaries bear witness to the popularity of Hume’s ideas. What Peter tells us in his epistle that this isn’t a “clever myth,” that he was there, and that he did see these things with his own eyes, but the Word of God is even more dependable than his eyes. That makes sense.

The problem, of course, with those who don’t believe these things, is that they don’t believe that the Bible is the Word of God, or at least not in any meaningful sense. The

assurance to the Christian, into whose mind and spirit doubts may creep, is that God Himself, in His Word, has told us these things happened, and God would never lie to us.

At the risk of putting my twenty-first century American mindset into what was going on in first century Palestine, this was a stressful time for Jesus and the like. The increasing realization and articulation on His part as to what that trip to Jerusalem would mean was troubling, and the exchange that ended with Him calling Peter what He did was awkward.

The trip up onto the mountain was a nice getaway, and the unexpected Transfiguration was a way cool addition. This incident in which the glory of Jesus was shown to them would have to serve, during those difficult and painful events of Holy Week, to those who had witnessed it as a reminder of where this thing ends; resurrection and glory.

The location of the Transfiguration is unnamed and was likely Mount Tabor, elevation about 1,800 feet. The text does not say that they reached the summit, and if you have done any mountain climbing or hiking in the Rockies or even the Appalachian Mountains, then you know that for them, it would have been a walk in the park,

Textual Notes

28. Luke tells us that it was “μετὰ τοὺς λόγους τούτους ὥσεί ἡμέραι ὀκτὼ - eight days after these sayings” that what is about to happen came to happen. In this chapter, He had sent the Twelve out to preach and heal, the five thousand are fed, and Peter makes the Great Confession. Luke does not include Peter getting called Satan.

Right before this, He has told them about the coming trip to Jerusalem, the third and final telling of that. Then He rather pre-emptively tells them that following Him will entail the same sort of suffering, and then “truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God,” a reference to this Transfiguration?

Probably more likely a reference to the Resurrection, but the Transfiguration might be seen as a preview of the glory of that event. Mark and Luke have the timing at six days, not eight, and the commentators see this seeming discrepancy as in fact differing ways of keeping time; do you include the days on both ends, or not?

Luke tells us that Jesus ἀνέβη εἰς τὸ ὄρος προσεύξασθαι – ascended onto the mountain to pray.” It is called “the” mountain. The definite article means that everybody knew which mountain it was, and well they would have. Those who were there would have known. Especially the three who went with would have known the place; Mt. Tabor.

Mt. Tabor makes several appearances in the OT, but its significance vis a vis the Transfiguration might be found in an extra-biblical custom connected with the mountain.

It was “one of the mountain peaks on which it was the custom to light beacons in order to inform the northern villages of Jewish holy days and of the beginning of new months.”

The earliest identification of the Mount of Transfiguration as Tabor is by [Origen](#) in the 3rd century. This early speculation is recounted by [St. Cyril of Jerusalem](#) and [St. Jerome](#) in the 4th century.^[8] It is later recounted in the 5th century [*Transitus Beatae Mariae Virginis*](#).

About that same time, the mountain became a pilgrimage destination, and later on several churches were built on it. Lately, people chasing the Ph. D, needing to come up with a thesis that says something new, have moved The Event from The Mountain, but the place that has always been the place is probably the place we’re looking for.

Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and John. Notable by his absence in the group is Andrew, the brother of Peter. We are given no indication as to why Andrew is missing. My theory is that Jesus took John, His self-described BFF, so you had to take James, the twin. Peter is taken because it was easier to take him than to tell him why he can’t go.

As for Andrew, he was just not pushy, and growing up with Peter you can see why. But if you’re looking for a theological answer to that question of why these three...these seem to be the core of the Twelve and are mentioned several other times as a group. Still searching for the theological answer as to why those three.

29. Luke tells us that the purpose of the going was to pray, and Matthew adds that they wanted to get away from the crowds, and it never says that they went up on The Mountain and Jesus would be Transfigured. If that’s the case, then they would have been a bit taken aback why what they were about to see and hear.

As He was praying, “τὸ εἶδος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἕτερον καὶ ὁ ἱματισμὸς αὐτοῦ λευκὸς ἐξαστράπτων – the appearance of His face changed, and His clothing became dazzling white.” The adjective “ἕτερος” means that his face looked different. The verb “ἐξαστράπτω” is used to refer to things like a star or a flash of lightning.

What exactly did that look like? Artists through the years have tried to capture the moment, of which Raphael’s 1520 painting is probably the most familiar. It was a one-time event; it had never happened before, and it has never happened since, and the point is that it’s a visual to match the audio that will come later.

Matthew (17:2) says Jesus was “transfigured.” The word is “μετεμορφώθη,” an aorist passive verb, and it is the same word that Mark (9:2) uses to describe what happened. Besides those two places, the word appears in Romans 12:2 and 2 Cor.3:18, where Paul tells Christians to “be transformed” and speaks of those who “have been transformed.”

In both places, the words of Paul have to be seen as an encouragement to Christians to be like Jesus, and that's the Law. The Gospel is that Jesus laid aside His glory, became like us, in order to redeem us. It is noteworthy that this event occurred after the words He said, and before the actual trip where that glory would be more completely laid aside.

Luke, probably wanting to avoid confusion in the minds of his Greek readers, describes the Transfiguration without using the word that Matthew and Mark used, probably because μετεμορφώθη is "the same as metamorphoses (cf. Ovid) of pagan mythology" (WP). Luke does not want the Greek readers to think of Jesus in those terms.

The word for the readers of Matthew and Mark, writing to Damascene Jews and Roman (mostly) Jews respectively, would not have had those connotations. A.T. Robertson encourages us to stick with the Vulgate "transfiguratus est" for that same reason, and he thinks that we should not talk about Jesus being metamorphosed, and he's right.

Transfiguration is a distinctly Christian word that describes a specific event in the life of Jesus, and it's the word that ought to be used. One of the tasks of the preacher and teacher is to build Christian vocabulary in our hearers and students, like any good teacher would build vocabulary for any subject worth knowing.

If you don't know the definition of proton, electron, and neutron – and the standards for the State of Illinois do not require that high school graduates know those terms, even though they will have taken Chemistry in high school - then you are not going to be able to learn much Chemistry, and you certainly can't teach it!

Matthew uses two similes to describe what Jesus looked like; that His face "shone like the sun" and his clothing became "white as light." Mark uses more words and only one simile to describe the same thing, saying that the garments were "glistening" and "intensely white, adding the very graphic "as no fuller on earth could bleach them."

30. Add now to that visual Moses and Elijah – Luke calls them "ἄνδρες δύο – two men," who have been long dead, and who are notably not Transfigured. Moses is the Great Law Giver and also a Prophet, as well as being the man who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the cusp of the Promised Land. Elijah is one of the most important of the OT Prophets.

In addition to their roles as Prophet, both men had encounters with God on mountains, in caves. Moses met God on Sinai, and when he came down, his face glowed (Ex 34:29), like Jesus' face (Mt 17:2) is glowing in this incident. Paul talks about glowing faces and the like to the Corinthians. Elijah met God in the still, small voice on a mountain.

The greatest contrast between Elijah and Moses then and the same men now is their being in a cave when God spoke to them. On Sinai, Moses waited (Ex 33:22) in a cave to be given the Law. Elijah was in a cave (1 K 19:8) when God spoke to him. You can see either or both caves the next time you travel to the Middle East.

Here, pretty much the opposite of being in a cave and seeing what they saw in their OT lives. And they had been dead for many years, yet here they were alive, and the Bible is

very consistent about life after death, and their deaths were unusual; God served Moses as his undertaker on Mt. Nebo, and He took Elijah to heaven in a chariot of fire.

It is important to note here that most of us have the benefit of having known about Jesus and about this incident for a long time, even for all of our lives, and we know how the story ends. We know that Jesus is the Son of God, and that at the end of the day He is actually much greater than either Moses or Elijah.

More than that, He is in an entirely different category from them. Not so clear at the time of this incident for those who were seeing it for the first time. To the disciples who were with Jesus the big thing here at this time was that Moses and Elijah had come back from the dead and who were standing there, right in front of them.

31. These two” ὁφθέντες ἐν δόξῃ - perceived that they were in the presence of glory.” Most of the translation have Moses and Elijah “appearing in glory,” and just what does that mean, anyway? The passive verb is the one commonly used for the perception of sight, and Moses and Elijah are seeing the glory of Jesus, who has been Transfigured,

The phrase “ἐν δόξῃ,” a preposition followed by a noun in the dative case, means to be beside something; Moses and Elijah are standing next to glory. Little BAG gives “in the presence of, before” as one possible meaning for that construction. Jesus is Transfigured, then Moses and Elijah come along, who perceive that they are in the presence of glory.

They were talking, and Luke alone tells us what they were saying; Moses and Elijah were talking about “τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ, ἣν ἤμελλεν πληροῦν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ – the departure of Him, what He was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.” They were well aware that what He will do on Holy Week will be the fulfillment of the salvation they had proclaimed.

32. Meanwhile, Peter and the others had been sleeping, but they were not just sleeping. Luke tells us that, “ἦσαν βεβαρημένοι ὕπνῳ - they were heavy with sleep,” meaning that they were plenty tuckered out, and following around Jesus of Nazareth must have been exhausting! They went from that heavy sleep to “διαγρηγορήσαντες – fully alert.”

You know how it is when you wake up to something other than the norm. What they woke up to was very abnormal; Jesus looking like He looked, and those two men standing there with Him, and they were talking. As we are about to see, at some point – maybe he overheard the conversation – Peter comes to know the identity of the two men.

32. Peter wanted to build exactly three σκηνάς (tents), one for those two, and another for Jesus, reflecting his belief that Jesus is at least on the same playing field with these two OT big guns. His not wanting to build a tent for himself reflects his understanding that he is not in the same category as the rest.

He had, after all, recently been called “Satan” by Jesus, right after he had confessed Jesus to be The Christ. So goes the roller-coaster existence of the Apostle Peter. Peter is

feeling it up on the mountain, and we get that, and we can well understand why he doesn't want to leave.

It's the same reason why you never would have left that Doobie Brothers concert in 1974, except that they told you that you have to leave now and would still be there if you could. They had left everything to follow Jesus, and it was an often difficult ride, and we should not be too hard on them for wanting the moment to last as long as possible.

33. So, what's with the tents? Robertson (WP) thinks that the Feast of Tabernacles was near, and that Peter wanted to observe it here, and not in Jerusalem. Barclay spends seven pages on the Transfiguration without even getting anywhere near the question, one of several problems with commentaries.

Gundry, as usual, is more concerned with comparing parallels than actually dealing with things in the text that are important and unclear, the problem with Gundry. Vincent seems to think that Peter thought they could build tents based on double occupancy, and that Jesus would have smiled at the thought; the structures were too small.

Could it be that Peter merely wanted to camp out? You know how it is when you're looking for a place to pitch your tent and you find one. This would be a good camping spot. The problem with that idea, to which I was moderately open a year ago, is that there aren't enough tents – back to Vincent – for all six of the people who are there.

Mark tells us (v. 6) that “they were exceedingly afraid,” which does not seem to square with the posture of giddiness in the presence of greatness and a desire, at least on Peter's part, to stay there. The fear is said by Mark to be so great, or of such a nature, that Peter “did not know what to say.”

Is that Mark's way (Luke says it too) of saying that Peter's idea to put up three tents was a silly thing to say, and even that Peter was embarrassed to have said it? You know how it is when you meet somebody famous and you get scared. Like Peter, you “don't know what to say,” so you say something that you wish you hadn't said. Awkward.

Awkwardness aside, clearly Peter wants to stay here, and the word for what Peter wants to put up is “σκηνάς,” which when it is used in Hebrews (11:9) means what we would call “tents.” But more than just camping out is going on here. All the other occurrences σκηνάς in the NT refer to what we would call “tabernacle;” the dwelling place of God.

34. What happens next helps us to understand what is going on here. The God who was present in the OT tabernacle is very much present here on this mountain. While Peter, who didn't know what to say, is still talking, he is interrupted by a talking cloud. This is not the first time that we have seen a cloud in the Bible.

The cloud led Israel around during their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 13: 21-22), and again in Exodus we read of the building and completing of the Tabernacle; and at the end of the story there come the words. Barclay says,

Then the *cloud* covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle' (Exodus 40:34). It was in the *cloud* that the Lord descended to give the tables of the law to Moses (Exodus 34:5). Once again, we meet this mysterious, luminous *cloud* at the dedication of Solomon's Temple: 'And when the priests came out of the holy place, a *cloud* filled the house of the Lord' (1 Kings 8: 10, 11; cp. 2 *Chronicles* 5: 13, 14; 7:2). All through the Old Testament there is this picture of the cloud, in which was the mysterious glory of God.

35. Then the cloud speaks; “καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης λέγουσα – a voice came out from the cloud, saying.” The prepositional phrase indicates motion out of, and the source of the audible voice is the cloud, and that's an unusual way for God to talk to us, but these are unusual times, aren't they.

Speaking of Jesus, the voice says “Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Υἱός μου ὁ ἐκλελεγμένος, αὐτοῦ ἀκούετε – this is the Son of mine, whom I have selected. Listen to Him,” says the voice speaking from the cloud. The talking cloud confirms verbally what the tents symbolize physically, that God is present among His people.

The voice of the Father from the cloud calls Jesus His Son, making Jesus God Himself, and the Father says that He is pleased with The Son. The voice then commands the hearers, two of whom are all-time great Prophets and three of whom are Apostles, whose vocation is to talk to others about Him, to first listen to Him.

The command to listen is “ἀκούετε, a present active imperative verb, connection to hearer, not to action. Listening to Jesus is to be part and parcel of their existence as Christians and as Apostle. The Pastoral Office is not one of several different functions, but of proclamation of the Word of God, done in many and various ways.

Matthew tells us that, upon hearing that, the disciples hit the deck, falling on their faces, the posture for worship and fear, which Matthew tells us they also felt. Jesus touched them and told them to get up and to stop being afraid. Matthew piles up the verbiage to make it abundantly clear that Moses and Elijah were no longer there.

Like Temple and much of the OT, they had served their purpose and had been fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Mark tells us that after that speaking “Ἰησοῦς μόνος – Jesus only,” the solitary figure, the one and only Son of God, shown by the visuals and the words to be in that different category from icons like Moses and Elijah, who are no longer to be found.

As for Peter, James, and John, “αὐτοὶ ἐσίγησαν καὶ οὐδενὶ ἀπήγγειλαν ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις οὐδὲν ὧν ἑώρακαν – they were silent, and to nobody they told in those days

anything of what they had seen.” We note the “in those days,” and note also that Mark and Matthew have Jesus telling them not to tell, at least not yet.

They can tell people after “the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” We see that the masses are already looking to Jesus as a “Bread King.” Word of this incident could only have spread fuel to that fire, and there’s more to Jesus than His just being able to feed people or to be transfigured. That’s assuming people would have believed it.

This incident is best understood in light of the whole life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in fact it occurs in the midst of His relating word of that death and resurrection. Jesus wants them to wait until the end of the story which is the earthly life of Jesus, and they do. As mentioned earlier, Peter devotes several verses to it in his second epistle.

Law/Gospel

Not Pleased/Well Pleased – Because of sin, God is not pleased with us. Because of His holiness and lack of sin, the Father is pleased with the Son. Because the Son died on the cross and rose again, taking away our sin, the Father is pleased with us. If you want to talk about how, in Baptism, God is saying to you that He is “well pleased” on account of Jesus, go ahead and do that. Go ahead and quote Luther’s Flood Prayer as well.

Down Low/Up High – This incident and what happens before and after are something of a microcosm of the Christian life. It’s like a roller coaster. We are down low, and then we are up high. If we talk about hell as being always down and never up, only worse, and it will never end, and if we talk about heaven as being always up and never down, only better, and that it will never end, that may help people to better understand those two places.

No God/God Present – The natural man is without God, and not knowing the true God, he must make up false gods. The Jesus who comes to us in Word and Sacrament is “very God of very God.” We know Him because He has revealed Himself to us in Baptism and the Word, and in a way “much more certain” than the Transfiguration, Peter says. We could make the case that in the Sacrament of the Altar Jesus is “more present than ever,” as Dr. Kleinig (Australian Lutheran Church) has.

Sermon Titles

Up on the Mountain, Down in the Valley

Life is Like a Roller Coaster

The Voice from the Cloud

Hymns

Anything from the *Transfiguration* section

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

Resources

ACC – Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Mark).
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG – Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by
William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCLY – William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark..* The Westminster Press, 1975

FGG – James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*. Concordia Publishing House,
1993

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek
Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek
Testament*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford
University Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, 1977.

WP – A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Baker, 1930

VINE – W.E.Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *An Expository Dictionary of
Biblical Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

BIB – www.biblos.com

GBO – www.greekbible.com

Digital Classics Library - www.perseus.tufts.edu

Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html