

## Transformed into Disciples

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

What a week for these disciples! Our Gospel passage today opens with the phrase, “six days later.” Did you notice that? “Later than what?”, I wondered as I read the story. Turns out, that’s an important piece of the picture. You see, just six days earlier, Jesus had begun to talk with his disciples about what lay ahead. He told them that he would journey to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, that he would be killed, and that he would be raised again on the third day. As if that hadn’t been enough, Jesus then said to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Challenging words – spoken to Jesus’ *disciples* – those who have left families and jobs behind and followed him.

“If any want to *become* my followers...” That must have puzzled them. If I’d been there, I might have mumbled, “Am I not already your follower?”

“... let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

If I’d heard that, I think I would’ve wondered, “As in, to Jerusalem, suffering, and death?”

Now, roll forward to our lesson today. Six days later, as Peter, James, and John ascend the mountain with Jesus, these wonderings must be whirling in the winds of their hearts. As he is transfigured before them – as his face starts to shine like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white – as the bright cloud envelops them – these unspoken questions queue up waiting for answers.

It’s no wonder that Peter, James, and John fall to the ground in fear when they witness Jesus’ transfiguration. God’s voice reverberates in response to their questions... “This is my Son, the Beloved ... **listen to him!**” Jesus’ call to take up a cross and follow him means that the disciples will be asked to travel where they do not want to go and witness what they do not want to see. But we know the end of the story: when they come from the mountain, they *do* follow Jesus... through his passion, death, and resurrection and all become martyrs for his sake. Something happens here on this mountain that transforms Peter, James, and John and enables them not only to respond to the call but to lead the other disciples to do the same. They won’t do this perfectly: there will be times when they stumble, Peter will deny Jesus three times in the early morning hours on Good Friday, but they *will* all take up their crosses and follow him.

Let’s look more closely at Matthew’s account of Jesus’ transfiguration. I want to suggest that we will find not just one, not two, but three transfigurations in this text.

Matthew tells us *Jesus’* face shone and *his* clothes became dazzling white... that *he* was transfigured.

But Jesus was not the only one. In the Greek manuscripts of Matthew’s Gospel, the word that we translate “transfigured” is a form of the verb μεταμορφόω. That’s where we get our word “metamorphosis.” The Oxford Dictionary defines metamorphosis as “the process of transformation from an immature form to an adult form.” This helps us to understand what happened when the disciples saw Jesus shining with the glory of God and heard God’s voice revealing Jesus as God’s Son. They, too, were metamorphosed... their faith, their understanding, their commitment all were transfigured. *They* transformed from immature would-be disciples to cross-bearing, self-denying followers of the Son of God.

Of course, the disciples’ transformation was not as immediate as Jesus’. Their *first* response was fear. But let’s look back at the text. When they fell to ground, Jesus came to them, touched them, and said, “Do not be afraid.” Of all the accounts of Jesus touching

people in the Gospels, this may be my favorite. Jesus touches people to heal them! When Jesus touches a man with leprosy, the leprosy is healed. When Jesus touches Peter's mother-in-law who is sick with fever, her fever is healed. Here, Jesus doesn't judge the disciples' fear or cast them aside as too weak to move forward with him. He touches them and heals their fear. He equips them to move forward. When they look up, they see nothing except Jesus himself alone. They have been metamorphosed: their fear is gone and their focus is solely on Jesus.

Their fear is gone.

Their focus is on Jesus.

It strikes me that this kind of transformation is what God desires from *all of us* who wish to be Jesus' disciples. Paul picks up on this in his second letter to the Corinthians (chapter 3, verse 18 if you want to check me). He writes there, "*all of us* ... are being transformed" – that's our word ... metamorphosed – "into the image" of Christ.

God seeks nothing less than *our* metamorphosis – our total transfiguration – from mere believers who show up on Sunday mornings to cross-bearing disciples. Our transformation will be more gradual than Jesus' ... and likely more gradual than it was for Peter, James, and John on the mountain. We are all at different stages of that transformation. For example, over the past several weeks, we've journeyed together through a series of reflections on stewardship that hopefully have helped transform the way we steward our time, talent, and treasure. Today is stewardship Sunday: today we've been asked to respond to these reflections with our commitments. This has been a moment of metamorphosis for each of us along our path to Christian discipleship. Thank you – sincerely – for the commitment that you are making to St. Matthew's Cathedral today. Your stewardship is essential to our continued operation: with it, we can continue to operate this Cathedral where we are all being transformed into disciples of Christ. From *this* transforming disciple to the whole room full of transforming disciples, thank you.

My friends, we are not finished transforming yet and we are not finished talking about stewardship yet. Within a matter of months, we will launch a capital campaign to raise the funds necessary to replace our air conditioning system so that our Cathedral can continue to serve Christ in our neighborhood, even in the heat of our Texas summers. This next campaign will challenge us to deny ourselves, to restrain our consumerism, and to give more than we think possible to give of our talent, time, and treasure. This will be for us *another* moment of metamorphosis in which we must allow God to grow us further from infancy toward maturity in Christ. The Good News as we face this challenge is that Jesus, is God with us - Emanuel. He understands our human fears, touches us, and says: "Do not be afraid." Like Peter, James, and John, we can be utterly transformed, can bear our crosses of self-denial, and can follow Jesus. And our Gospel passage today gives us valuable information about how we can participate with God his work of transfiguring us: Matthew tells us to **withdraw, listen, cling, and focus.**

First, Jesus took the three disciples with him to a high mountain by themselves. This is the first step: transformational experiences like this one do not happen when we are surrounded by great crowds of people as was so often the case for Jesus and his disciples. Rather, like a worm inside a cocoon – like disciples on the top of a mountain – metamorphosis takes place when we escape the hustle and bustle of daily life. To cooperate with God's transforming work, we must **withdraw** to a quiet place where we can be still and hear God speak.

Then, God speaks to the disciples: "This is my Son; listen to him!" The second step of our metamorphosis requires that *when* we withdraw to a quiet place where we *can* hear God, we not be surprised to hear what the disciples heard that day on the mountain. God will say

to us – just as He said to them – *listen* to Jesus. Listen: when he asks us to deny ourselves. Listen: as he asks us to give more than we think we can. Listen: to the myriad ways in which he calls to us to follow him.

Next, the disciples fell to the ground in fear. Listening to the voice of God, undergoing metamorphosis ... is not easy at all. When Christ makes a call upon our lives – calls us to self-denial and self-giving discipleship – he does not promise that it will be easy. When we hear his call, we may be overcome with fear and doubt. The third step of our transformation is to **cling to the Good News** that Jesus is our Incarnate God. Even in his transfiguration on the mountaintop in which his divinity is revealed, Jesus is fully human. He understands our human responses of doubt, fear, dismay... you name it! And tenderly, compassionately, lovingly, he comes to us, touches us, and heals us. To participate in our transformation, we need to **cling** to the promise of this touch.

At the end of the mountain top experience, the disciples look up and see “nothing except Jesus himself alone.” We will know that our lives have connected with Christ’s transfiguration and with that of the three disciples in our Gospel passage today ... we will know that our metamorphosis is well underway when our sight has become so **focused** that we see nothing but Jesus himself alone.

Withdraw, listen, cling, and focus. These are the keys that unlock the third transfiguration in our Gospel passage today: our own.

Let us pray: O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be metamorphosed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.