
Transfiguration: Learning to see
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 9:2-9

In our Protestant tradition, this week we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus. That's the name we give to the story we just read from Mark. The story where a few of the disciples climbed a mountain with Jesus and saw Jesus transformed - sorry, I mean "transfigured". This week also marks the end of Epiphany. So next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Lent. Which means that this Tuesday is Shove Tuesday. And here at Chapel in the Park United Church we will be celebrating that on Wednesday. Online only. With a shared meal starting at 6, and our Ash Wednesday service beginning around 6:45. Please come. Because the surest sign of Lent is eating pancakes together.

If you remember back just a few weeks, we were discussing Jesus's baptism. And in Mark's version of Jesus's baptism, during the event God descends like a dove and says to Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." That story describes God making a revelation of who Jesus was in a way that the disciples could understand.

Today's story of the transfiguration of Jesus happens near the end of Jesus's public ministry, not long before Jesus goes to Jerusalem. Not long before his arrest and crucifixion. So today's story is about 3 years after Jesus's baptism. And again, at the transfiguration God makes a revelation of who Jesus is. And what is that revelation? In Mark, as we just read, God appears as a voice in the clouds and says, "This is my son, the beloved; listen to him." I have often thought that was such an odd thing for God to say. Because the revelation at the transfiguration is virtually identical to the revelation at Jesus's baptism!

So, according to Mark, God's revelation of Jesus did not change substantially during the three years of Jesus ministry. Didn't the disciples learn anything new about Jesus after spending three years with him? After interacting with people, teaching, and healing? What is going on? The message revealed by God is basically the same as the

message that God had revealed years earlier at Jesus's baptism! What does the story of the transfiguration add to our understanding of Jesus and his ministry? And - more importantly - what does the story of the transfiguration add to our understanding of our own faith? Why do we celebrate transfiguration Sunday anyway? I get why we celebrate pancakes ... but why do we celebrate the transfiguration?

I think I know the problem. Because a quick reading of the transfiguration does not give us the whole story. Something more is going on here. One difference between the revelation at Jesus's baptism and the revelation at the transfiguration was the audience. When Jesus was baptized, the audience was just ... well we are not actually told. But presumably just a crowd of no-name people who hung around John, including people who over time became Jesus's disciples. At Jesus's transfiguration, the audience included Jesus's core group of friends, and the images of Moses and Elijah. Is there some significance to them? Absolutely! Mark's audience knew their significance without being told, but we have to guess. In this case, we can guess very well.

Most biblical scholars do not see the transfiguration as a historical event as written. But if we step back and consider Moses and Elijah as imagery we might get somewhere. It is reasonable to connect Moses with the Torah - the opening books of the Hebrew Bible. And to connect Elijah with the prophets. So perhaps the revelation at the transfiguration was different than the one at baptism. The difference being that the prophets and scripture were complicit in the revelation. Perhaps the original intent of the story of the transfiguration was to state that Jesus's ministry was in alignment with both prophecy and scripture. Perhaps the story was crafted with that intention and nothing more. I would also explain why the story happens on a mountain, when there are no mountains in Palestine, only hills. Presumably "the mountain" is an attempt to link the story to the story of Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai.

Whenever I hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, I always wonder - what actually happened on that mountain? What would we have seen if we had been there ourselves? One interpretation is that Jesus looked different to the disciples because Jesus changed. The story is certainly written that way. Mark says, "Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach

them”. The story as written certainly suggests that Jesus changed, or at least his appearance changed.

But perhaps Jesus looked different to the disciples because the disciples were themselves changed. Perhaps it was the disciples’ ability to see that changed. Did Jesus’s body physically change? Or was it that John, James, and Peter could now see the face of God shining through the man that they thought they already knew well? Who was changed that day? Jesus? Or the disciples?

Learning to see sounds like something that babies need to do. And they do. But even those of us who are slightly older than babies sometimes find we ourselves need to learn to see differently.

I recall one weekend years ago when Marjorie and I went to a festival in Toronto. I learned a lot of things at the festival. But I perhaps learned the most just by walking into the room where the festival was held. Because just by walking in the door I learned that I needed to see better. When we walked into the festival, I was immediately stunned to see an enormous man standing in the middle of the room. He was a biker. His beard went down to here. And his leather jacket was more a collection of Harley Davidson patches than leather. Why was I surprised? I spend a fair bit of time with people who are a bit rough around the edges. On this occasion I was surprised because Marjorie and I were at a particular festival. And I brought in the door of the festival some presumptions about what the crowd would be like. And this biker completely shattered my presumptions. Perhaps for this story to make sense I need to confess that Marjorie and I were at the Toronto Tea Festival. And I needed to fix my ability to see. Because the former Rev. Paul struggled - for 2 seconds - with the image of this monster of a biker being interested in soaking up the nuances of exotic teas. I needed to learn to see better. That was the best tea festival I ever went to because I learned to see better.

I’m also reminded of the 1988 movie, “Rain Man”. That’s a movie that’s all about learning to see better. The movie is centred on a person, Charlie. He is selfish, rude, arrogant. He takes his girlfriend, Susanna, for granted. But we need to be a bit sympathetic because at the beginning of the movie, Charlie’s father has just died. And Charlie was looking forward to receiving his father’s estate of about \$3M. He actually

needed the money because he had a business venture that was going sideways and the money would be very helpful right then.

But when the father's will is read, it is revealed that Charlie had an older brother Charlie did not know about. Charlie's brother, Raymond, had been institutionalized for decades because he lived with autism. Raymond needed a lot of support, so the father had left almost his entire estate to Raymond. Charlie only got an old car and some rose bushes. The \$3M was put in trust for the care that Raymond needed.

Charlie - perhaps understandably - resents his father giving his estate to a person who is a stranger to Charlie. But his reaction is a bit extreme. Charlie kidnaps Raymond from the institution Raymond lives in, and they go on a road trip. Charlie was holding Raymond as a hostage against what he thought was his half of the estate.

Raymond is an interesting character. He functions pretty well overall, but has many compulsive behaviours. In the beginning, Charlie tries to "cure" Raymond of his compulsive behaviours, but soon realizes that strategy doesn't work. And as their road trip together continues, Charlie becomes much more in tune with Raymond's needs. Charlie even learns that his own life runs more smoothly if he anticipates, plans ahead and gives Raymond what he needs. Raymond is not hard to predict, because he is totally driven by a fixed weekly schedule for food, snacks, TV shows, and other things. Surprisingly, Charlie even comes to enjoy Raymond's company.

And by the end of the movie, Charlie no longer thinks that Raymond is faking autism. Charlie no longer thinks that Raymond is trying to annoy him. In fact, by the end of the movie, Charlie loves - and even likes - his brother Raymond, the brother he did not even know he had.

It's a fun movie to watch. Because all movies show character development. But in this case, Raymond does not change. Raymond is not capable of change. So all the change happened in Charlie. At the beginning of the movie Charlie was completely self-absorbed and selfish. And by the end of the movie Charlie not only appreciated Raymond, but he stopped taking his girlfriend for granted too. Charlie learned to see Raymond, Susanna, and even himself in a different light. Charlie becomes a better person. Learning to see better changes your whole life! Learning to see better leads to

new life.

Not only is Lent almost upon us, but this is also Black History Month. Black History Month is an invitation for each of us to learn to see better. Because Black History month is no so much about black history. I say that partly because “Black” history is just history. Black History Month is a chance for all of us - including black people - to see ourselves more clearly. And in particular to learn where each of us could see better.

You know that I’m a progressive minister. But in fact, my understanding of Black History Month comes from almost 100 years ago. Because in 1926 Carter G. Woodson published the book “The mis-education of the Negro”. At the time, the accomplishments of black people were completely absent from the school curriculum. Woodson famously said, “Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.”

In short, black children were growing up believing that black people had not done significant things, which disempowered these black children to dare to dream, create, and innovate, lead.

Black History Month grew out of an event in 1926 called “Negro History Week”. This was a program aimed only at black children. To educate black children on the huge contributions that black people had made to society over many years. The original Black History week was about helping black children see their own culture in a more accurate and a much more positive way.

We can all learn to see better during Black History month. Historically, black people learned to see their own history in a positive way. And non-black people have been invited into that conversation too - to learn to appreciate the gift of everyone that makes up our society today - particularly during February, black people.

Black History Month exists because of deep racism in North America. Racism that is still present today. But the path forward is for all of us to learn to see better. And to appreciate - at a very deep level - that all people are ... people. Morgan Freeman famously said, “Black history is American history; they are completely intertwined”. All people are people. All people are God’s children. And if you don’t see that, I invite you to learn to see better.

We are blessed here at Chapel in the Park United Church to have such a diverse congregation. I would love to hear your stories. In my dreams we could create a video montage featuring your stories that highlights the wonderful diversity that is right here. If you would like to share stories about your culture or yourself, please let me know. It is by sharing our lives together that we will all learn to see better. We will learn to see each other better. And we will learn to see ourselves better too.

When I read the story of the transfiguration, I imagine that it was the disciples's ability to see that changed. And what would be the bigger miracle anyway? Jesus's body physically changing? Or the disciples - who were ordinary people like us - learning to see better and being able to see the face of God in Jesus? Besides, if Jesus had changed - that change would have lasted for - what - 30 seconds. But the disciples learned to see better. And that affected them for the rest of their lives. Learning to see better impacted everyone they met. Learning to see better is a way better miracle than any momentary optical episode.

And here is the big question. if the disciples learned to see better that day, did their ability to see better come down from the mountain with them when they finally descended? When they left the mountain to return to everyday life, did the disciples take their new capacity to see into the valleys of their world? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in Jesus when they were not on the mountain? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in other people? Were the disciples able to see the face of God in each other? Were the disciples able to see the face of God even in themselves?

We too can seize the opportunity to see better. To see the face of God in our own community. To see the face of God right here in our midst. To see the face of God in each other. And yes, to even see the face of God in ourselves. If you can't quite see that yet - relax. Lent is coming. Keep looking for the face of God and God will appear. Of course, you just might need to learn to see better first.

Lent is almost here. I would love to know in what way you want to learn to see better. We are all in this together.

Amen.