

"The Transfiguring of Our Faith"

Luke 9:28-36

March 3, 2019

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

You have heard the jokes about how many of a certain group it takes to change a lightbulb. How many Germans does it take to change a lightbulb? One – they are efficient and not very funny. How many therapists does it take to change a lightbulb? Only one but the lightbulb has to really want to change. How many real men does it take to change a lightbulb? None. Real men aren't afraid of the dark. And, of course, we adapt this formula of comedy to poke fun at ourselves. How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? Change? We don't do change.

Although we usually tell that joke with Lutherans as the subject, it could apply to various groups of people because it reflects a common dislike for change that many people have. Although there is much emphasis on change these days and people talk about liking change, I think people like change only until it affects some valued tradition of their own. Then they demand things stay the same. For example, people might talk about wanting change in worship with more contemporary music. However, if you don't sing Silent Night holding candles at the end of the Christmas Eve service, some people are going to be upset.

Why is there often so much opposition to change? Sometimes, many simply don't like change in one or more areas of life. It's a personal choice. They like the way they've always been. Sometimes people fear change. There is the threat of harm or danger or some other bad thing if certain things change. Then there is change that actually is harmful. If the pharmacist changes the content of your prescription without telling you, it could be dangerous. If you are allergic to certain kinds of food and your menu is changed to include such food, this could be dangerous to your health if you're unaware of it. So, although there are often jokes about change, there is sometimes serious reasons for opposing change.

Today is all about change here at church. It is the Transfiguration of our Lord. "Transfiguration" is simply a long and fancy her name for the word "change". It celebrates an account in our Lord's life in which He was changed in a very big way on a mountain top in front of his inner circle of disciples – Peter, James, and John. Was this change well-received?

I'm sure many people in Jesus' day probably did not want Him to change at all. They were perfectly happy and satisfied with him being a generally good guy; a knowledgeable Rabbi; a miracle worker who miraculously feeds, cures, and even raises people from the dead; or one who stood up for the little man in confrontations with the religious hierarchy of the day.

I'm sure many people feel the same today. We really don't want Jesus to change from our perception of him. We would like to keep Jesus at arm's length and in a very comfortable position for us. Jesus is fine as a nice guy, a teacher of morals (as long as he doesn't get too serious about it), a helper of the poor, the miracle worker, and so on. We certainly don't want him to challenge us, either in the matter of our beliefs or in our practices. He is "safe" to us when he is kept locked up in church here, only to get out on Sunday mornings.

The trouble with wanting things to stay the same is the unintended consequences of not changing. For those of us who are my age and older who like to bemoan the fact of how good things used to be and lament how bad things have become, we have to consider how things truly would be if there was no change. Do you really want to go back to typewriters instead of computers; black and white televisions instead of HD color televisions; VHS videotapes instead of downloads from the internet; oscillating fans instead of central air conditioning and so on? No change means no progress and no progress can be bad.

This is especially important in our relationship with God. If things were naturally good in our relationship with God, then we could advocate and desire that things stay the same. However, things are not naturally good in relationship to God. We have inherited our natural opposition to God from our original parents, Adam & Eve. We devise ways to sin though on our own.

And there's the problem. If sin stays the same and does not change, then we are in trouble. We will surely die. If death remains in place and does not change, hell becomes our final destination with the devil ruling over us for eternity.

We are forced to admit that, sometimes, change is actually good. Hardly anyone would argue, except on the basis of nostalgia, that it would be good to go back to the old technology which we had when we were kids. Even rugged traditionalists see the value of change every day.

This is shown to be true in our text for today. Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up to a mountaintop to pray. And there Jesus was transfigured – changed. But we must rightly understand the nature of this change. Jesus was not dramatically and drastically changed from something he wasn't to something entirely different. He was not changed from an ordinary man to a divine being or vice versa. Rather, it says that his appearance, especially his face and his clothing, were altered. In other words (for those who fear or worry about change), His essence was never changed into something different than what it was before. Instead, Jesus' appearance was changed so that His disciples could see clearly who he was and is – the Son of God and the Savior for the world. This change in appearance does not initiate something new, but confirmed that which was old.

There were other changes on the mountain with Jesus that day. There was the appearance of the two great personages of the Old Testament: Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets). The mission of Jesus which they discussed with him on the mountain would now supersede and fulfill their work in the Old Testament.

Then there was the huge cloud (symbolic of the presence of God in the Old Testament) which overshadowed them. There was the voice coming from the cloud which said in no uncertain terms, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" This meant there would also be a change in the perceived identity of Jesus. No longer would he be seen as a mere Rabbi, a moral guide, or even a worker of miracles. Beginning with Peter, James, and John, and then with the entire world, Jesus would be known as the Son of God.

However, this brief glimpse of glory was soon over. The voice of God from heaven was gone. The bright and shining cloud was gone. Moses and Elijah were gone. And Jesus' altered appearance was gone. Now was the time for Jesus to get to work. Although Jesus' final destination was His throne in heaven, the journey to get there was not glorious as we measure glory. There would be no more bright shiny clothes, no appearance of dead Old Testament heroes, and no clouds with divine voices coming from them. Jesus would go the way of the cross as had been prophesied and had been followed by Him up to that point. The three disciples got a foretaste of that, as well as the assurance through His brief change, that Jesus was the one with accomplish this.

Jesus would take away the sin of the world, including yours and mine and bear that weight on the cross. He would suffer the punishment for that sin which we deserved. He shielded us from the wrath of a holy God against sin. And by offering his innocent and divine life upon the cross, he earned forgiveness for all of our sin's and guaranteed to us eternal life.

This has "transfigured" us and our lives. Although only Jesus' appearance was altered and His nature was not changed, our very natures have been changed. This is usually not

through some “mountaintop experience”. The change comes in very simple ways. As we shall see later in the service, a little water poured on the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit changes a person completely. In our baptism, we are joined to Christ’s death and His resurrection. Flowing to us out of the baptismal font are all the things which Jesus came to give: forgiveness, cleansing, new life, and salvation. The Bible says, “therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

We are completely new and different people now, even though we may look just like everyone else does. The world does not recognize us, even as it does not recognize Jesus. Yet, as the divine glory was present in Jesus, as shown by His transfiguration, so His glory resides in us. Full and complete glory, like Jesus’ appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration is waiting for us in heaven.

We should not fear change nor oppose change simply for the sake of no change. As much as it might pain us to admit this, sometimes change is good. Jesus’ reminder by His brief change before His disciples of who He is, what He came to do, and what He would accomplish is always a good thing. Our reading of His brief change can transfigure our faith, changing it from doubt to trust; from fear to confidence; and from worry to peace.

So, as we enter the Lenten season this Wednesday on Ash Wednesday, let us always remember and hold fast in faith and hope to the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we read and meditate upon His suffering, abandonment, and death, we remember the glory is still there and will be revealed in His resurrection on Easter Sunday and in His return on the last day. We share in that hidden glory now so that we might share in His revealed glory later. His appearance was altered, but our essence has been changed and we are delivered from sin to righteousness; from death to life again; and from hell to heaven forever. Amen