

"A Transfigured Lord and a Transfigured Church"

2 Cor. 3:18, Transfiguration Day, Feb. 15, 2016

Friends, I know it is true and you know it is true! By and large people don't like bugs all that much, but most people make an exception when it comes to butterflies—because butterflies are beautiful! But let's remember that butterflies haven't always been beautiful! For the first part of their lives these beautiful creatures were wooly little worms, crawling around on the ground, looking kind of gross! But at a special time, when the moment was just right, these ugly little wooly worms were transformed, by the God who created them into beautiful butterflies!

This transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly is something we call in English a "metamorphosis," which is very closely related to that Greek verb *metamorphothen* that appears in the opening verse of our Gospel lesson today—translated with the English word "transfigured."

"And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them!"

Brothers and sisters, today I am hoping to speak to you about a Transfigured Lord and a Transfigured Church, so let me first speak with you about our Transfigured Lord.

It was six days after Peter had just declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16) that Jesus took with him Peter, James and John atop a high mountain, probably in the evening hours, where he is suddenly transfigured before them.

In this Transfiguration event, (1) Jesus himself is given the divine confirmation he needed with respect to his humanity that he was on the right course and headed in the right direction. (2) St. Luke tells us that while he was there, Moses and Elijah, who appear in glory, also talked with Jesus, and spoke with him of his departure which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30). **(3) Jesus was confirmed in his ministry by the voice of the Heavenly Father** that spoke from heaven: *"This is my beloved Son—listen to him!"* (v. 7). **(4) Fourthly, by their very presence there Moses and Elijah prove that the saints are not dead but gloriously alive** in the communion of saints above, who with the saints below, but one communion make! Jesus one day quotes those words which God spoke to Moses at the burning bush centuries before to his adversaries, when God said, *"I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob! I am a God of the living and not of the dead!"* God doesn't say, I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (5) Peter naturally wanted to stay atop that mountain, but the Lord Jesus said, "No! There is a world down there that we need to redeem!" (6) This transfiguration experience also confirmed the faith of the disciples, that what Peter had said about Jesus being the Son of God was most definitely true.

Friends, there was a day when our Lord Jesus Christ was transfigured before those three disciples, Peter, James and John, but as I read the words of our Gospel lesson today—obviously there are times the Church should be transfigured too. And I don't mean by this that there will be times when the people of God who make up the New Testament Church will discover that their clothing is also shining radiantly white, whiter than any bleach could ever bleach them—or that our faces will be shining like the sun, the way that Matthew tells us that Jesus' face shone brightly like the sun. But there are times when the church throughout the

world, and the church in any given locality, like our church here that we call Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Irmo, SC, such be a gathering of people where and when we can see Jesus alive in the gift of one another too! And if you are about ready to say to me: “Hold on there a minute pastor, we’ve never heard anything like this before!” well then just take a closer look with me at that epistle lesson today.

When St. Paul says in **2 Cor. 3:18**. **“And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another!”** The Greek word that is translated into English here with the word “transformed” is actually the very same word that is translated with the word “transfigured” in our Gospel lesson today!

In some respects, of course, our entire church building and our entire church structure has gone through some major metamorphoses in the last 12 to 14 years. And recently the sanctuary, and the offices, and the fellowship hall, the restrooms, and the stairwell leading to the downstairs education wing of our church have all gone through a lovely metamorphosis...in receiving a fresh coat of paint.

Our playground outside, not only for the children of our preschool, but also for the children of our church also—is being given a major “makeover” so that they can have a place to play and be gathered together safely with their parents! This is a type of metamorphosis or “transfiguration” too!

There is a columbarium sitting on the edge of our church cemetery that is relatively new. **BUT ALL OF THESE METAMORPHOSES OR “TRANSFIGURATIONS,”** if you please, are only minor changes that are indicative of a much greater inner metamorphosis or “transfiguration” that has taken place in the hearts and minds of God’s people who make up the Church of Jesus Christ in this place!

The fact that the church, as the people of God, may undergo a transfiguration experience of its own from time to time becomes evident through St. Paul’s words to the Philippians, **“It is God who is at work in you both to will and to do of his own good pleasure!” (Philippians 2:13)**

When I think of Mount Olive Lutheran Church there are so many times when I can see Jesus manifesting his own life to the world through so many people of you who are actively involved in our various ministries here. Just as St. Paul said one day of the Corinthian congregation, I can say of this Irmonese congregation: *“The love of Christ controls us because we are convinced of this that one has died for all, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised!” (2 Cor. 5:14-15)*

It’s an awesome thing to see the glory of God. And St. Paul in our epistle lesson is also reminding us of that day when Moses asked God for permission to see God’s own divine glory when he was up atop Mount Sinai. God said to him, **“I will let you see the back side of me, but you cannot see my face; for no one can see me and live” (Exodus 33:17-23).**

God then told Moses to hide himself in the cleft of a rock and to hide his face while God passed by. In spite of all the precautions that were taken, even though Moses was exposed to only a little of the majesty of God, still, his face shone so brightly from that experience that the people could not stand to look at him. He had to wear a veil over his face to darken the glow. Such an experience is what Jesus shared with his three disciples.

But as the light of Christ shines into us by the power of the Gospel through God’s Holy Word and Sacraments, we do not want to put a veil over our faces as Moses did! Far from it! Paul writes: **“Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over**

his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end!" (2 Corinthians 3:12-13)

How is it possible first of all for us to see the glory of God?

There is only one way for us to genuinely see the glory of God today and that is to look in faith upon our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as he hangs upon the cross for our soul's salvation, whereupon we also come to believe that it was actually for each one of us and because of our sins that nailed him there!

Yes, long before Jesus was born the Prophet Isaiah foretold in **Isaiah 40:5**, "**The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together!**" And do you remember what Jesus prayed to his Heavenly Father on the night before he died? He said: "**Now is my soul troubled and what shall I say? 'Father save me from this hour'? No, for it was for this purpose that I have come to this hour! Father, glorify your named!**" Then a voice came from heaven: "**I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again!**" (John 12:27-28)

Yes, we glorify the Father when we preach the goods new of Jesus Christ, and him, crucified! We are a transfigured church when we can with St. Paul and know these words to be true for ourselves: "**For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone into our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!**" (2 Cor. 4:5-6)

The primary message of the Transfiguration is that Jesus Christ is God. But have you ever stopped to think that DURING THE COURSE OF OUR OWN FAITH DEVELOPMENT THAT WE TOO MAY SPEND SOME MUCH NEEDED TIME LIKE CATERPILLARS IN A COCOON OF OUR OWN BEFORE WE ONE DAY BURST FORTH UPON THE SCENE AS THOSE WHO FINALLY, AND AT LONG LAST, ACTUALLY BECOME ENGAGED IN PUBLIC MINISTRIES OF OUR OWN ALSO FOR THE GLORY OF GOD?

Take our Old Testament lesson today, for example. From the time that Elijah first meets Elisha and Elisha become a disciple of Elijah, he was not out there in the public arena at all. He is 100% a behind the scenes man. Elisha is like a caterpillar wrapped up in a cocoon waiting for the moment of his own transfiguration, which happens strangely enough on the day when Elijah is transfigured into heaven!

So many times throughout the Holy Scriptures, we can see that God trains in secret those whom He purposes to use in public. The Patriarch Joseph, for example, the second youngest son of Jacob, was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery for a mere 30 pieces of silver, and through a series of seemingly most unfortunate events, something we could call his own private secret training sessions with God in prison and other places, Joseph finally emerges as the 2nd highest in command in the Pharaoh's palace in Egypt who will later be highly instrumental in saving the Israelites from starvation, and thus extinction!

For forty years Moses keeps the flock of Jethro at the back of the desert, before he becomes the leader of God's own flock, the people of Israel, on their way through the desert to the promised land.

Unknown to others, David for years mightily overcomes the lion and bear with his trusty slingshot, before he publicly enters into conflict with the Giant Goliath.

So Elisha must have his training as the servant and companion of Elijah! So Elisha, so to speak, must spend his own time in a cocoon, before he can emerge,

empowered and ready to take the place of the Prophet Elijah as a witness to God's grace. This is the only way that he will one day become a vessel fit for the Master's use and prepared for every good work!

Our Old Testament lesson reminds us today that when the last stage of this notable journey is reached at the River Jordan, both Elijah and Elisha cross it, remembering that the River Jordan itself often becomes a symbol for death in the Bible. You know how we love to sing in that great hymn, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer," *"When I cross the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside. Death of death and hell's destruction, land me save on Canaan's side. Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more! Feed me till I want no more!"*

There were those molesting voices who twice reminded Elisha that the Lord was about to take away his master. These sons of the prophets, with more knowledge than heart, would only hinder Elisha's last moments of personal conversation with his master, by occupying him with thoughts only about himself and his great impending loss. Elisha silences these intrusions upon his soul's communion by saying, ***"Yes, I know it keep quiet!"***

Therefore, the parting moment has come; Elijah is about to be caught up into heaven; and now Elisha, all alone and bereft of his master, is about to be left behind to preach the same Word of God that Elijah did, to that same nation of obstinate and stiff-necked people who always turned a deaf ear to everything that Elijah had to say. Still the LORD God was exercising his patience towards them!

In this solemn moment Elijah offers his final word to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, *"Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me."*

This by no means implies that he asks for twice as much of a gift, or of power, as Elijah possessed. The Hebrew word implies the double portion of the elder son (Deut. 21:17).

Elisha does not ask for a double portion of material wealth, but a double portion of spiritual power. Other prophets will need spiritual power, but, if Elisha is anointed to take the place of Elijah – to be in his room – then, indeed, he will require a spiritual power twice as much as that of any other prophet.

Elijah replies, *"You are asking a hard thing."* Nevertheless, says Elijah, *"If you actually see me when I am taken up from you, this shall be granted to you, but if you do not see me when I am taken up, this will not be granted unto you!"*

It all depends upon Elisha's ability to see Elijah ascending into heaven! The ability to see Elijah ascending into heaven will become the secret strength of Elisha manifesting the same spiritual power in his ministry as Elijah did!

And isn't this where we derive so much of our spiritual power for ministry too, in the firm belief, that with eyes of faith we have seen our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who was crucified for our sins and raised again for our justification (Romans 4:25), ascend to the right hand of God the Father almighty on the 40th day after his glorious resurrection from the dead?

Just as Elisha's seeing Elijah ascend into heaven became the strength of Elisha's ministry, our having seen Jesus ascend to the right hand of the Father in heaven becomes the secret strength of

our ministries too—the key our doing that very thing that St. Paul is encouraging us to do in our epistle lesson!

Think of the first Christian martyr Stephen. Even as he was being stoned to death by his enemies, he still prayed the prayer that Jesus prayed on the cross: “Father, do not hold this sin against them, for they do not know what they are doing!” But before this Stephen professed: *“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.”*

In the light of that vision Stephen was so endowed with power from on high that, like his Master, he can pray for his murderers, and, amidst the falling stones, calmly commit his spirit to the Lord Jesus. So, too, the Apostle Paul according to his conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and a later vision he was given according to 2 Corinthians 12, when he was able to look into the very corridors of heaven and see what was going on there, walked as a witness for Christ on earth through all the years of his devoted life.

And isn't it this same depiction of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ that St. Paul must have in mind when he says in our text today: *“We all looking on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face are transformed according to the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18)?*

We must catch the vision of the Lord in glory, if in any sense we are to represent on earth that blessed and perfect Man who has gone to glory.

So it came to pass, *“As they still went on and talked, that, behold there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.” Elisha saw it, and cried, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.”*

Nothing quite like this great scene had ever taken place on earth. As someone has said, “It is far above the silent removal of Enoch, and far below the calm majesty, of the ascension, when no chariots of fire were needed to sweep the Risen Body of the Redeemer from the earth: when as they beheld, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” If, however, Elisha sees his master ascend to heaven, Elisha will continue to see him in the heavens to which he had ascended!

The result of thus knowing Christ in His new place in heaven is very happily set forth before us in picture in the case of Elisha. The vision of the ascended Elijah led Elisha to a twofold action on his part.

First “he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in pieces”; as a sign of his own personal repentance, and then secondly, “He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him.”

Therefore from now on, empowered by the Holy Spirit, Elisha will not be to exhibit the character of Elijah that has now gone before him into heaven.

So too, the Apostle Paul after saying we know that Christ has ascended into heaven on our behalf and will one day return to us from heaven to take us to be with him in glory, goes on to say in 2 Cor. 5:17: *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come and all of this is from God who through Christ has reconciled us to himself and committed to us the ministry of reconciliation!”* Amen