

Who Is He?

On this Sunday before Lent begins, along with many other churches, it is our tradition to read and ponder the meaning of the gospel story of the Transfiguration. The story is a bridge between the public ministry of Jesus and his journey to the cross. It's a bridge that can make some people uncomfortable. Because—let's say it aloud—to our 21st century ears, this is a weird story.

It is a mystical story, a mysterious story of a close encounter with the divine.

It's a story I wish I could explain. But I can't. This is a story which invites us to put aside our usual way of being in the world, put aside our scientific lenses for understanding what's going on around us, put aside our groundedness in physical realities and listen instead to spiritual realities which can't be touched or verified or proven. This is a story to live into, open to learning the truth which lies beyond our daily experience.

Just as did Peter, James, and John. They had been traveling with Jesus, listening to his wisdom, learning from him, watching him heal the sick and preach about the kingdom of heaven. Being his disciple was the choice they'd made, and most of the time felt good about. But they must have wondered about him. Where did his charisma come from? Where was he heading on this itinerant ministry? And what did he mean when he started talking about "taking up the cross?"

These three disciples weren't all that different from us. We're attracted to Jesus and start to follow him for different reasons. Maybe it's his moral and ethical guidance which are so needed in today's world. We hear the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and decide to try to live that way. Maybe we're attracted to Jesus because we admire the people who are his followers, and we want to join their crowd, be part of their fellowship. Maybe we've chosen to call ourselves Jesus' disciples because the rituals—the music, the prayers, the sacraments, even the stained glass—of the church are beautiful and touch a place in our hearts not reached by the rest of our lives in the world. Or maybe we're intrigued by his healing, spiritual way.

But somewhere along the path of being Christ's disciple we are sure to encounter difficulty. Somewhere we are faced with the troublesome questions of why did he have to die, and not only that, why was his death so excruciatingly painful? Something like a transfiguration moment helps us bridge the gap between the initial choice to follow Jesus, and the choice to follow him all the way.

Many of you know that I am part of a monthly interfaith forum in which spiritual leaders of various religious traditions share their perspectives on topics, with an opportunity for audience feedback and questions following our "5 minutes each" presentations. In a few minutes I think you'll see why I always say that this forum helps me grow in my Christian faith and understanding, and why I encourage Presbyterians to attend. The way it works is that four of us collaborate to choose the topics well in advance, so we can publicize and prepare our talks. Earlier this month, the topic was "Jesus."

Now, perhaps you would assume that only the Christians in the room would be able to speak with faith about Jesus. Yet Rabbi Ed claimed the first opportunity to speak, because as he reminded us, his Jewish tradition holds the first claim to Jesus, for Jesus was a Jew. He spoke of the Jewish context in which Jesus lived and taught, and he called him a great rabbi. What was most moving to me was the tone of affection he expressed for his brother, Jesus.

I was also moved by the Christian representatives on the panel as they each expressed their personal faith in Jesus, each with the nuances of their particular traditions. There was great resonance among us, yet it reinforced for me that none of us capture the whole truth about Jesus. We're something like the fable of the blind men who try to describe an elephant by describing the part of the elephant we are able to touch.

Yet I'd like to bet that the five minutes which will last in the minds of most of the people who were there belonged to Shadmani Amin, who spoke representing Islam. It was eye-opening to hear her talk about Jesus as one of the 5 most important prophets who preceded Muhammed, peace be upon them all: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Stories of Jesus and Mary play a significant part in the Qur'an. "We are required to believe in Jesus," she told us. Her love for Jesus as part of her Muslim faith was evident, similar to the love we might feel for Biblical characters who show us the way to relationship with God.

According to the broadest Muslim definition, Jesus was a Muslim, for he submitted himself to the will of God. That's what a Muslim is. Another person present at the interfaith forum was a Sufi minister, who at my request, spoke up about why Sufis call Jesus a Sufi. It's because of his mystical path toward unity with God. So what we heard that day was that Jesus was a Jew, Jesus was a Muslim, and Jesus was a Sufi. We Christians really can't claim that "Jesus was a Christian," because Christians are those who follow Jesus. This most central person in our faith is admired and revered across many faiths.

However, said Shadmani, in Islam, Jesus did not die on a cross. That would be shameful for such a great prophet. Rabbi Ed did not speak to this question, but I think I am safe in approximating what he might say—that maybe Jesus died on a cross, but that would have been because he crossed the line with the Roman authorities. And the resurrection stories are the product of first century hopes for keeping the Jesus movement alive.

We need a bridge to cross between trust in Jesus as a great teacher, healer, prophet, and mystic to faith in Jesus as the unique Son of the living God, our Savior and Lord. Walking across that bridge is what distinguishes Christians from followers of other faith traditions.

For Peter, James, and John, the bridge was their mystical experience on the mountaintop where they saw light shining through Jesus, knew the witness of the law and the prophets in the presence of Moses and Elijah, and heard God pronounce Jesus as Beloved Son, commanding them to listen to him.

We are not so likely to have such an experience. I'm not saying it's impossible, but it's not likely. Which makes it all the more precious that we have this testimony in the scriptures of that day on the mountain with Jesus which, after the crucifixion, after the resurrection, the disciples could start to understand. "Now I get it," I can imagine Peter saying to James and John after the resurrection. "He wasn't here ONLY to heal us, to preach the kingdom, to be our teacher. He was here to open up the heavenly realm to the earthbound. Remember that day on the mountain? He was here to repair the breach between God and God's beautiful creation. Remember the light we saw shining through him that day? He was here to end the dominion of sin and death and establish the rule of truth and life. Remember the voice of God saying 'Listen to him?' He has shown us now what it all meant. That's why he suffered. That's why he died. That's why he LIVES!!"

We who call ourselves Christian may take an initial step toward following Jesus, but discipleship is not a one-time thing, it's the journey of a lifetime, and it's full of bridges to cross. There's the bridge from admiring Jesus to entrusting our very lives to him; from Sunday morning faith to 24/7

commitment; from “okay, this feels good for now” to struggling through the hardest of days with hope and faith because he struggled, too, he walked this way and he triumphed, for our sake, so that resurrection life would be ours, too.

The bridge of grasping who Jesus is transforms who we are and how we live. When we see his glory and know that the Jesus whose feet were dusty from walking the roads of Palestine is also the eternal Lord of the universe, we begin to see that glory elsewhere. In Marilynne Robinson’s wonderful book called *Gilead*, the old preacher named John Ames has lived his entire life in a small town in Iowa, where he’s seen grief and loneliness and yet in his old age experienced love and redemption. And he writes to his young son,

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. . . .
Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. (2004, Farrar, Strass, & Giroux, New York, p. 245)

And if we see the light of God shining in the world, if we “practice transfiguration,” we’ll be less inclined to fear and more inclined to hope—something we’ve been talking about a lot in recent months. For like the stricken disciples on the mountain, who felt the touch of Jesus saying “Get up, and do not be afraid,” we will receive the grace of knowing both the heaviness of his calling and the healing of his touch. (Idea from Elizabeth Palmer, *The Christian Century, Sunday’s Coming* for 02/26/17) We will have crossed the bridge of suffering with the One who is the Light of the World. We will know a little better who He is, and who He calls us to be.

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.