

“The Bible: Best Selling Least Read Book”

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(Mark 9:2-9)

Transfiguration Sunday

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Joan Osborne sings, “If you were faced with [God] in all His glory, would you want to see if, seeing meant that you would have to believe in things like heaven. And in Jesus and the saints, and all the prophets?”

Well, Transfiguration Sunday says that we are faced with God in all God’s glory. Many of us learned that from Sunday School pictures of Jesus’ face shining and his clothes bleached whiter than Clorox. Have you ever noticed how many pictures of Jesus show him with his face shining? Jesus as a baby – his face shining. Jesus transfigured on the mountain – his face shining. Jesus on the cross – his head shining. The risen Jesus – his face shining. And you wonder, why do the artists have him shining? They were saying that the only way you can really know Jesus is through Easter and the resurrection.^[1]

Transfiguration is a permanent fixture in our church calendar and lectionary readings. **“Moreover, that the church is directed to preach on the same texts year after year challenges the modernist assumption characteristic of fundamentalism and historical criticism that the text of the Bible has a meaning.”^[2] (SH)** Well, the story of the transfiguration is both prequel and sequel to the resurrection.^[3]

On this mountain we get **story** from God’s point of view. God is storyteller and actor here.^[4] Mountains^[5] are tense spatial objects: the perennial battle between good and evil. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, while Israel “played” below with the golden calf. On a high mountain the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. The cloud recalls the Exodus journey. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets – the Word of God. The voice from heaven recalls the baptism of Jesus. The story of God’s dealings with humankind is wrapped in the symbolic logic of the Transfiguration.^[6] God prints all over this mountain. Sacred stuff. Take off our shoes.

Remember how Moses came down from the mountain and his face was shining? And Elijah was lifted into heaven in a fiery chariot. Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace? And the question of Nebuchadnezzar? “Didn’t we throw three men into the fire? But I see four, and the fourth has the appearance of a god.”^[7]

And guess what? When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the furnace, the one whose appearance was like the son of God doesn’t come out of the furnace of suffering. He is not miraculously preserved from the fire; he remains within it.

Jesus is transfigured on the Mount, but he comes down to face a cross and death. He is not miraculously saved from death; he walks into it with his head held high. He “endured the cross, disregarding its shame,”^[8] in order to deliver us to freedom and hope. So let us look to Jesus, the fourth figure in the fire.

Like Jesus we have the Word of God.^[9] We don’t get literally transfigured on a mountain, but we can be transformed by the Word. It’s the power of the Word to change us that gives it power. In the end, all we have is the Word.

Moses is part and parcel of that Word. Moses is word of God wrapped in Law from God. I call Moses the original mountain man: Mount Sinai, Mount Nebo, and Mount Hermon. Here's the man to whom God gave the Ten Commandments. The last time we saw Moses in the OT? "And Moses went up to Mount Nebo. And the Lord showed him the Promised Land and said, 'I will let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.' So Moses the servant of the Lord died there and God buried him in the valley of Moab."^[10] Moses – dead on the mountain in the prime of life – dead in a foreign land overlooking Promised Land.

Now he's alive again, giving hope for every one of us ever denied our dreams, or left on a mountain for dead. Moses back on holy ground – same ground where he first met God. See Moses alive on the mountain.

And Elijah is much more than a man who never died. Elijah is word of God wrapped in the prophet's mantle. We know him as the prophet who stood up to Ahab but ran like a scared rabbit from Jezebel. We know him as the prophet who stood down the preachers of Baal. The last time we saw Elijah? He was translated to glory and his ride was a chariot of fire. See Elijah – alive on the mountain.

If ever there was a conversation we should want to overhear, this is the one. Luke tells us that Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah about his **exodus**, his impending departure – in other words, about his death. When we have an ordeal to face, and we all face ordeals, a conversation with the word can make a difference.

Listen, if the Word of God prepared Jesus to face suffering and death, don't you think it's time we give that same Word the opportunity to help us face Monday morning and every remaining day of life we have left on this earth? Can't it help us face cancer with consolation? Face unemployment and financial loss? Face broken hearts and wrecked romances? What we get in suffering is consolation from the Word.

I'm claiming that Jesus' lifelong conversation with the Law and the Prophets gave him the courage and wisdom to obey God. And to this day Jesus calls us to resist. God doesn't expect us to defeat the devil, but resist the devil.^[11] Don't let the world around squeeze you into its mold, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.^[12]

Don't we know that we are apprenticed to the word of God? It is a system of training a new generation of practitioners of a skill. St. Augustine said that we are joint inquirers before the great teacher – Jesus Christ.^[13] How do you fall in love with the Bible again?

I hope you know that I have a lifelong love affair with this book. With the psalmist I testify: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth."^[14] My dad used a particular strategy to interest me in the Bible. In the course of conversation, he would quote some obscure biblical passage and require me to either know it or find it. Over the years, we have continued this practice with one another. For example, when he announced that he was leaving his goat farm to me in his will, I quoted this verse: "I will accept no goats from your fold." He knew that the verse was from Psalm 50 – the psalter reading for today's lectionary.

An African American preacher said, "My parents talked so much about biblical characters in my childhood, I thought they were my extended family." This is the intimacy, the interest, and the imagination I pray you will develop. Until we fall down the rabbit hole^[15] like Alice,

walk through the wardrobe to Narnia,^[16] or take a tornado to Oz with Dorothy,^[17] we can't enter the "strange new world of the Bible,"^[18] we can't really experience its meanings. We have to get inside Scripture in order to live out Scripture.^[19]

We can develop that lifetime of practice, engagement, and conversation of "the word that journeys with us through life." And it will grant us a heart, a mind, and courage. Why else do you suppose we read so much Scripture every Sunday? It's a mirror that shows us our true selves and true God. Reading Scripture we will learn that it dissents from our false ways and our resistance to God speaking a fresh word to us. The Bible is a multi-voiced, multivalent witness that exposes our tendency to read the Bible only to maintain our self-interest.^[20] A church that doesn't read and interpret Scripture with all its available resources can retire or die.

If Scripture was good enough for Jesus, then it is good enough for us. Get inside this book, live in its word, engage its characters in conversation, talk with its God – the Triune God of our faith and do so daily.

Read this book. For the drama and the deliverance. For the story and the salvation. For the truth and the transformation. Read this book as word of God and word of the church. Read this book as lamp to our path and light to our feet. Read this book as sword of the Spirit and bread of life. Read this Book.

[1] Fred Craddock. *The Cherry Log Sermons*.

[2] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company*. Biblical texts are capable of multiple meanings. Grasping this principle should make it easier for Christians to understand one another and treat theological differences with more respect. This is one point where I believe "deconstructionism" can be of help. Derrida never said texts can mean just anything. Rather his deconstruction is a way of seeing how every text, provokes multiple possibilities of meaning. Deconstruction doesn't destroy meaning, but works as a systematic resistance to arriving at a single totality of meaning. The point is that the reader should return again and again to the text and that such returning makes authentic moral action possible. To be open to one more possibility, according to Derrida, is the precondition of justice. It is the plumbing of alternative meanings that leads to understanding, and the elimination of alternative meanings, to violence.

[3] Transfiguration, while surely gospel event, is intended to mean on a symbolic level and contains what we can call "symbolic logic." I want you to see the story as a mysterious system of symbols in which huge Christian meanings are taught. See David Buttrick, *Homiletic*.

[4] Point of view refers to the person who tells the story. (Mary Frances Hopkins, *The Rhetoric and Authority of Narrative Discourse*, unpublished manuscript, Dept. of Speech Communication, Louisiana State University and A & M College). Catherine Belsey talks about "classic realism." In the category she includes "all those fictional forms which create the illusion while we read that what is narrated is 'really' and intelligibly happening." And in a real sense, God is telling the story of the Bible. God, as "first-person" narrator is within the world of the story. As a first-person narrator, God is an actant in the story. The term, "actant," from structuralist theories of narrative, continually reminds us that we are discussing an agent who acts, who participates in the story. In literary pieces, examples are Huck Finn in Mark Twain's novel, Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, and Pip in *Great Expectations*.

In this sermon I try to take seriously the dramatic character of the Bible. Something grand and glorious is at stake in the story of the Transfiguration. It contains real action, real drama, and real players. Something is at stake in this story, such that had it gone a different way, the relationship between God and humanity would certainly have been different. What if Jesus had chosen a different path after

coming down from the Mount? What if the Elijah talking to Jesus had been the Elijah afraid for his life against the wrath of Jezebel? He would have discouraged Jesus from obedience to God. What if Moses had shared with Jesus the loss of his dream of entering the Promised Land? "Jesus, I tried to follow God in everything and God killed me for it, and buried me in a mountain, and denied me entrance to the Promised Land."

In the Bible God is both first-person narrator and major character. God is the protagonist in the story told by the Bible. God, however, is not subject to the limitations of the world God inhabits. God is close in time, in space, in sympathy with the characters and events of the story. And in the incarnation God really becomes primary actor. "The drama we inhabit with this omnipotent, omniscient author constitutes his life as it affects ours. God is the actant in the story; God is active and God is the main character.

When we read Scripture in church someone addresses us. And by the unanimous tradition of the church, this voice is the Word of God, the Logos, the second identity of the Trinity. And this Word is the actual Logos, that is, the incarnate Word, the Word that God speaks as Jesus the crucified and risen Christ. So Irenaeus, Athanasius, Cyril, Maximus, Luther, Edwards, Barth.

[5] The most likely location for the transfiguration is Mount Hermon. It is the tallest mountain in the area, and Mark tells us that Jesus went up on "an exceedingly high mountain." It is also close to Caesarea Philippi where the earlier events in the gospel took place. The mountain was used by the Canaanites in mythological religious myths. In the book of Enoch, Mount Hermon is the place where the Grigori (Watcher) class of fallen angels descended to earth. The account in Enoch is an explanation of Genesis 6 where the sons of God took wives of the daughters of men. According to the Enoch story, God sent angels to destroy the fallen angels and instructed Noah to build the ark.

[6] Premodern Christian interpreters interpreted the Old Testament as a witness to the One who "came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets" (Mt 5:17). Today we incorporate a literary perspective as well as a doctrinal one in dealing with OT texts. "Faithful interpretation of Scripture requires an engagement with the entire narrative: the NT cannot be rightly understood apart from the Old, nor can the Old be rightly understood apart from the New. This sermon attempts to weave biblical stories from the entire canon into a wholistic approach that celebrates the entire Bible as the church's canon.

[7] Daniel 3:25.

[8] Hebrews 12:2b.

[9] The Bible exists only because the church gathered these documents for her specific purpose: to aid in preserving her peculiar message, to aid in maintaining across time, the self-identity of her message that the God of Israel has raised his servant Jesus from the dead. Be entirely blatant and unabashed in reading Scripture for the church's purposes and within the context of Christian faith and practice. Indeed, guide your reading by church doctrine. "I am not ashamed of the gospel." "It is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who has faith." Romans 1:16

[10] Deuteronomy 34:4-5.

[11] James 4:7-8a – "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."

[12] Romans 12:2. The first part of the verse is from J. B. Phillips translation; the second part from RSV.

[13] Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hayes. *The Art of Reading Scripture*.

[14] Psalm 119:103.

[15] *Alice in Wonderland*. The story of a girl who falls down a rabbit hole into a strange new world of creatures.

[16] Based on the classic novel by 'CS Lewis'. Four London children are sent to a professor's country home in order for protection during World War II. There they find a magic wardrobe which leads to a mystical land called Narnia, which is being ruled by an evil witch. To defeat the witch, they must join forces with Aslan, the lion God of Narnia.

[17] In this charming film based on the popular L. Frank Baum stories, Dorothy and her dog Toto are caught in a tornado's path and somehow end up in the land of Oz. Here she meets some memorable friends and foes in her journey to meet the Wizard of Oz who everyone says can help her return home and possibly grant her new friends their goals of a brain, heart and courage.

[18] Karl Barth said this but I don't have the exact reference.

[19] Some may want to argue with what appears as my sentimental or spiritualist view of Scripture. Please understand that I am not advocating any particular theory of inspiration. I am not holding forth the Bible as a magical book or giving it priority over God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Bible is not a Yellow Pages offering up specific verses as proof of a particular belief. I am saying that the regular reading and hearing of Scripture and the regular prayer, liturgy, and practice of our faith will, over time, forge a faithful imitation of Christ. This is one of the reasons I think it impossible to be a Christian apart from the church.

[20] The multi-voiced witness of the Bible exposes our tendency to read the Bible "for ourselves." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 140.) Using biblical texts to "prove" our point of view is self-centered and narcissistic. It is way of claiming that the Bible is our book and a denial that the Bible is the word of the living God. For example, when I hear Joel Osteen lead his congregation in their introductory creed, I cringe: **"This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today I will be taught the word of God. I boldly confess my mind is alert, my heart is receptive; I'll never be the same. In Jesus name, God bless you."**