

Metamorphosis

In the name of the Father's beloved Son, dear friends in Christ: Each season of the church year has an overarching theme. In Christmas, it's that to save us from our sins God has become man: the Lord of glory is incarnate in the Babe of Bethlehem and now shares our human flesh. In Epiphany we reverse that idea. The main theme is that this man, Jesus, who for some thirty years has been growing up and living the life of a humble carpenter pretty much indistinguishable from anyone else, is none other than God the Son. That's what we've been seeing for the past several weeks in the Gospel readings as Jesus has been revealing more and more of his divine nature by casting out demons and performing miracles and so on. And today, as we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord, we come to the end and highpoint of the Epiphany season. If we had any lingering shadows of doubt about whether Jesus is truly God, they vanish in the light of his radiant glory revealed on the mountain. The presence of Moses and Elijah standing with him also bears witness to Jesus' divinity. Who but the Lord himself could summon such illustrious company? But what clinches it is the voice of the Father speaking from the cloud, "This is my beloved Son." There's no mistaking his meaning. All of it together is intended to get us to fall down with Peter, James, and John and confess the truth that this man Jesus is also truly God.

And that's normally where'd I'd go in sermon for Transfiguration Sunday. I'd highlight the fact of Jesus' divinity. But I'm convinced you already know that. And so this morning I'd like to move past that and see what else we might discover from the event we call Jesus' Transfiguration. You know, that's a word we don't use in any other context. We can talk about having Christmas in July or our own personal epiphanies; but we never talk about anything or anyone being transfigured except for Jesus. What exactly does it mean? I'm glad you asked. It's a word that comes to us from Latin. And there are two parts: *trans*, which means change, and *figure*, which means shape or form. So, to be transfigured means to change your appearance. And certainly we see that as Jesus begins to shine forth with heavenly splendor. But the New Testament wasn't originally written in Latin. It was written in Greek. And it turns out that the word we translate "transfiguration" is actually the Greek word "metamorphosis", which means the same thing: to change form. But that's a word we *do* use in other contexts. We use it, for example, to describe what happens to creatures like moths and butterflies that live their lives in two distinct phases. First they hatch from their eggs as caterpillars. Usually ugly little devils, they eat ravenously and grow to many times their original size. But then they enter a dormant stage. They wrap themselves in a cocoon for some time as they undergo metamorphosis. They emerge later in an entirely different form. It's the same creature, but you'd never know it by looking at it. What was once an ungainly crawling worm has become something of grace and beauty that's able to spread its wings and fly above the earth.

And with that in mind, what I'd have you see is that the metamorphosis of Jesus is more than a revelation of his deity. It's also a prophetic foreshadow of the future life that awaits all of us. We are going to be changed. Our bodies now subject to disease, injury, the ravages of age, and ultimately death and decay are going to become something glorious, immortal, and incorruptible. For many of us that will involve going into a dormant stage: being wrapped in a cocoon of sorts, and being buried in the earth. Others, who are alive when Christ returns, will experience this metamorphosis spontaneously even while they live. But we are all going to be changed in a twinkling of an eye when the perishable is put on the imperishable. Our spirits too will be changed. We'll go from the sinful, self-centered, ugly devils

that we are to have pure hearts and minds filled only with thoughts of love and selfless service. Thus the metamorphosis of Jesus points ahead to the new life that we will share with him when he appears again and we too, like Moses and Elijah, will stand with him in glory.

There's a significant difference though. In the metamorphosis of Jesus, what we see is him dropping the veil, so to speak. He is already by nature in that perfected state of glory. His heart and mind are already pure, holy, and undefiled; they always have been. So for him the change of appearance has more to do with showing what's been there all along but has been hidden to his disciples up until this time. During his ministry on earth Jesus is in what we call his state of humiliation, in which time his divinity and his heavenly glory are largely concealed. You see, for him to be our substitute and Savior, it's necessary that he live a perfect human life without making use of all his divine powers and attributes. He must operate within the same limitations that we have. This means too that the body he has he must willingly make subject to all the pains, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities that our bodies experience. Sometimes I'll run into Christians who imagine that Jesus never got sick or had a toothache or anything like that. They'll say, "He was sinless, so he never suffered from the effects of sin's curse." That's not right. He suffered all the ills of this life just like we do. The point is that he *willingly* allows himself to suffer. He willingly makes himself subject to sin's curse and all that attends it. And in this sense, the real metamorphosis of Jesus is not so much that he shone brightly with glorious splendor on the mountain, but rather that all the rest of time he walked on this earth he didn't.

Indeed, Jesus knew that he had an even greater metamorphosis or change of bodily form to undergo. He alludes to it in today's text when he commands his three disciples to say nothing of what they'd seen on the mountain until after he'd been raised from the dead. They were strictly prohibited to tell others of his brief display of shining glory until he had first suffered a far more drastic change of form. For it's one thing for the eternal Son of God who is in every way equal to his Father to appear in the form of a human like the rest of us, and quite another for him to appear as *the* sinner upon whom the heavenly Father poured out his wrath against the sins of the whole world. St. Paul says it this way: "God made him who had no sin to become sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." There's a metamorphosis for you: Jesus who deserves only honor and praise receiving mocking and brutal torture by the hands of sinful men; Jesus the healer of sick and broken bodies having his own body broken and racked with pain on the cross; Jesus the Lord of Life dying the sinner's death.

This is the metamorphosis that Jesus thought far more important for his disciples to see, to contemplate, and to speak about. This is the metamorphosis of Jesus that makes ours possible. He changed in a negative sense and suffered pain, humiliation, and death so that we could be changed in a positive sense and enjoy righteousness and life with him in glory.

And now his metamorphosis is complete. Having been raised from the dead and having been exalted into his glory, he'll never change again. But we will. Our metamorphosis is yet underway. And while we long for the day when it will be complete and our bodies are raised incorruptible and our spirits made perfect, we recognize that even now we are being changed. As we heed the voice of our heavenly Father who directed us to listen to his beloved Son, we know that by the Spirit's power we are being changed for the better. The Word of Jesus is destroying the sinful nature in us through sorrow for sin and repentance, and life and Christ's righteousness are being imputed to the new person within us – the one that will forever in glory with him. Therefore as we celebrate our Lord's metamorphosis, let's also give thanks to God for ours and hasten its completion by keeping our ears open to his Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!