

Today's readings link two other-worldly accounts – Elijah's ascent to heaven in the fiery chariot with the Transfiguration of Jesus. In a mountain-top experience that was both literal and figurative, Peter, James, and John saw a vision of Elijah and Moses standing with the transfigured Jesus. Peter placed Jesus on a par with two great figures of Judaism, by suggesting that they build three shrines: one for Moses, who gave the Law, one for the prophet Elijah, and one for Jesus. A heavenly voice then pronounced almost the same words that were said at Jesus' baptism – "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." We might wonder why Mark told two such similar stories about the heavenly voice, until we realize that Peter, James, and John were not present at Jesus' baptism. They were called to be disciples afterwards. The pronouncement is a repeat for us, but it wasn't for them.

The Gospel writers made a hierarchy among the disciples. Peter, James, and John are the inner circle – only they saw the Transfiguration and went with Jesus when he prayed in Gethsemane. The Twelve are the next group, and then many unnamed 'disciples'. But Peter, a simple fisherman, was given the top billing and with it, unrealizable expectations. When Jesus asked, "Who do others say that I am? Who do you say that I am?" Peter stepped up and affirmed, "You are the Messiah". But right after that, Peter was summarily put down when he did not accept that the Messiah might have to die. Peter also failed the high expectations placed on him by denying having known Jesus after Jesus' arrest. Today, Peter is on a 'high' – he recognizes Jesus' greatness, which is affirmed by the heavenly voice

Last week, there was a long article in the *Globe & Mail* about unrealistic expectations put on young children, mainly girls, in gymnastics. What came across was the girls' deep and lasting sense of failure when they realized that they simply were not good enough to go to the Olympics, no matter how hard they trained and how many other competitions they had won. The current fashion to tell young people that they can become anything that they want to can become a cruel kindness when that person realizes that their dream is beyond reach. I have encountered that kind of situation many times with students whose struggles with first year science courses had put their dream of attending the veterinary college at Guelph out of reach. I am truly blessed and fortunate that I have never had those kinds of unrealistic hopes or expectations. As a university professor, I never had illusions that my research might lead to a Nobel Prize; as a parish priest I have had neither the desire nor the expectation to become Bishop.

To me, the right advice is simply to encourage a person to be the best that they can be. Michelle and I sometimes see a man named Brad at Zehrs in Guelph. Brad bags groceries. He has Down syndrome; he is very proud of his long service badge, because he is the employee with the most years of service. I am disappointed that the provincial government has decided to stop supporting sheltered industries, such as the ARC workshops. The argument is that those employed by ARC will have greater dignity if they work alongside more able co-workers, and earn a full minimum wage. My concern is that most of these people will fail to compete in the job market and will end up on the street.

As with other miraculous stories in the Gospels, we can try to scratch an itch to wonder exactly what happened on that mountain-top and to what extent the story might depart from historical fact. But in my opinion all that itch-scratching is likely to do is to give us sore skin (or sore heads). To me, it is more worthwhile to ask about the sub-text of the story – not the literal story, but the figurative one. What did Mark think it meant to be transfigured? Literally, the word 'transfigure' means to change in

outward shape or form. When Jesus underwent transfiguration he was literally a “shape-shifter.” This is a motif in many mythologies, and in children’s stories such as *The Frog Prince* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Christians have given transfiguration a specialized meaning – the supernatural and glorified change in Jesus’ outward form. I think that Mark wanted us to accept the concept of an inner spiritual shape-shifting in our own lives, parallel to the outward change of form that happened to Jesus on the mountain. We infer this sort of idea intuitively when we say that we see someone “in a new light” as a result of a change in their behaviour or attitude – a clear reference to Jesus shining dazzling white in the Biblical story.

Change is also a principal motif in our other reading, of Elijah and Elisha walking by the River Jordan. Elijah had been Elisha’s mentor, just as Jesus was mentor to Peter, James, and John. Elijah struck the Jordan with his cloak, and the waters parted, letting the two of them cross on dry ground. When Elijah crossed the river, he began the separation between this world and the next – like the River Styx in Greek mythology. The shape-shifting was completed when he ascended to heaven in the fiery chariot. Elisha also changed, from Elijah’s disciple, or student, to becoming a prophet in his own right.

The idea of change in these stories raises questions about our own faith journeys. As followers of Jesus, what would it look like for our parish, or for us as individuals, to be transfigured – shape-shifted? How would our faces be spiritually radiant? As we grope to find our vision for the future – that “heavenly vision” of the Gradual hymn – how will others who seek God recognize that St. George’s is a place of holiness, an outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven?

I am guessing that it is unlikely to happen in a single dramatic moment – more like baby steps. In our journey with God, what we can do is to strive to be holy. The 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian John Henry Newman said that we can use ordinary actions to strive for the holy. He called this “Holiness as a route to future blessedness.” In other words, doing small things repeatedly makes the good habits of holiness. Coming to church, to worship God Sunday after Sunday, is itself an act of holiness. Taking part in our parish life: those who prepare the altar or buy flowers week after week, the readers and greeters, the coffee hour hosts, the prayer chain, those who bring food for our food banks or take the blessed food in their cars. All these people give of themselves on behalf of us all. All these small actions are acts of holiness.

Jesus did not tell Peter, James, and John what they were about to see ahead of time. I imagine them saying, “Why has he dragged us all the way up this mountain?” The Transfiguration was unexpected for Peter, James, and John – maybe for Jesus too. The story tells us that moments of closeness to God are unexpected. When the disciples saw Jesus’ face change and become radiant and the heavenly voice spoke, they realized that he wasn’t just a great faith healer and teacher; he really was holy.

That was in a unique and dramatic moment, but John Henry Newman tells us that we, too, can become transfigured – but gradually, through small acts of holiness, such as when we show the face of Christ to the people that we meet in our daily lives. It is my hope and prayer that we may all be inspired to achieve holiness through these small, and sometimes faltering, steps, so that we and our parish may be transfigured – shape-shifted – by God. The words of the Aaronic blessing include the idea of God’s light shining on us: ‘May the Lord bless us and keep us; the Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious unto us; the Lord lift up his countenance upon us and give us peace.’ Amen; may it be so.