

OFF THE HOOK

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Transfiguration Sunday, February 26, 2017

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Basic Meaning of Transfiguration Is to Show Us Who Christ Really Is

The context in the church year for this passage of scripture (Matthew 17: 1-9) is that it goes way back in time. This is the text that is preached on the Sunday before the season of Lent begins. With Lent starting this Wednesday, this is the day for the Transfiguration.

It's a bit frustrating for preachers because, if you're looking at a 30-year career or so, that's 30-some sermons on the Transfiguration. It's hard to come up with something new every time since the basic meaning of the story and the human response to it take the better part of two sentences.

Sentence number one: The basic meaning of it is showing us who Christ really is, period. Sentence number two: Upon seeing it, the natural human response seems to be worship, bending the knee and building an altar, period. We're done. Well, we're not, really. You're just not that lucky.

I do want to show you a couple pictures of a huge painting by Raphael Sanzio. The first one, on page 2, shows the Transfiguration of Jesus in its setting, which is in St. Peter's Basilica. You can see that the guy in purple is a priest, standing near two huge candlesticks. Here, you get a feeling for the sheer size of the painting.

The second image, on page 4, is the painting alone, without candlesticks or anybody

standing in front of it. You will note, up on that golden rock, Peter, James, and John, all three of them shielding their eyes. Up above, with Christ on one side, there's Moses on the right side holding a tablet. On the other side is Elijah in a mantle.

Then way down below is the crowd showing the context of the story, which is the healing of an epileptic. He's a young boy looking crazy down at the bottom of the painting, and he has just been healed prior to the Transfiguration story.

This giant artwork was worked on from 1516-1520, so it's Raphael's very last painting, unfinished at the time that he died in 1520. The style is Italian High Renaissance, and I thought you might enjoy seeing that.

Here Is a Theological Question: Is Jesus of a Different Order than We?

Now here I would like to ask you a theological question. And just prior to that I have a quote from Einstein, of course. He once said, "Everybody is a genius." He actually said that, and then he followed it up with this thought: "But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid."

So here's the theological question: "Is Jesus of a different order of being than the rest of humanity?" For example, animals are of a different order of being than are plants. Humans are of course a different order of beings



ST. PETER'S BASILICA — RAPHAEL'S TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

than, say, chimpanzees or angels. Is Jesus of a different order of being than you and I?

Another way of wording the question is, “What is the proper response to this scene of the Transfiguration? Is it worship? Or is it emulation? John 14:12 is one of the most problematic texts in the entire New Testament, where Jesus comes out and says to his disciples that “Greater things than these will you do.” This is very problematic for people because anybody who reads this understands that we’re talking about a guy who turns water into wine, heals all sorts of people, walks on water, resurrects the dead. Pretty cool stuff. Yet nevertheless he says, “Greater things than these will you do.”

So now, if Jesus is of a higher order than you and I are, then that text is sort of unfair. It’s unreasonable to expect lower beings to act and speak and think the same way as higher beings. So to say that “Greater things than these will you do” is therefore not true, and actually it is a little worse than that. It would be sort of like a taunt. It would be a bit cruel. It’s like making fun of a chimpanzee because it can’t do algebra. The stupid chimpanzee can’t even finish the equation. That kind of thinking is ridiculous.

The Question Has Merit, I Think; Tell Me Where My Logic Goes Awry

Is Jesus of a different order of being than the rest of us are? Let me give you a few thoughts from the New Testament.

It says we are children of God and that Jesus is the son of God. Therefore, Jesus is like an older brother, a sibling.

The New Testament says that Jesus was filled with the spirit and therefore was able to resist temptation. In addition, there are stories of performing miracles, teaching like nobody’s

business, stilling the storm, and resurrecting the dead — all because he was filled with the Spirit. And yet, so are we. The Gospel says of us that the kingdom of heaven is within us. At the very end of John, it says that God breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Paul says that we’re a temple wherein God resides, presumably.

So I’m asking, “What’s the difference?”

Also in the Gospel of John, it says that Jesus is the light of the world. And then, shortly thereafter, Jesus says in the Gospel of John that *you* are the light of the world.

Now, Here’s My Suspicion; Forgive Me if I Get a Touch Negative on This

I’m also going to have fun with it. My suspicion is about venerating Christ, exalting Christ, worshiping Christ, praising Jesus, setting him up on a pedestal.

Secretly, we let ourselves off the hook. It’s an illusion. Magicians do this all the time. Look, look, look, look at this hand. And then you’re doing something else with the other hand. Sleight of hand. We’ve seen it all before.

We say, “Jesus did all these things because of how uniquely great he was.” Miracles, healings, all of it. Jesus is the Christ, for goodness’ sake. The son of God. He’s out of our league, and we’re miserable sinners. Therefore, rather insidiously we secretly lower expectations of ourselves. We lower the bar for us because we just can’t compare. We’re going to lose if we try to compare ourselves with Jesus.

We convince ourselves that we can’t perform miracles. Heck no. We can’t heal our brother or our sister. We can’t end violence in our society. We’re a war-mongering people. We



THE TRANSFIGURATION — WITH MOSES (right, holding tablet) AND ELIJAH (left, wearing mantle). ON ROCK, PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN

always have been. We always will be. Deal with it. And as Henry Ford said, "Whether you believe you can or you believe you can't, you're right."

As I said at the beginning, the meaning of the Transfiguration, sentence number one shows us who Jesus really is. Or is it showing what humanity is? Saying that is a bit shocking. I saw several of you squirm. But should we expect less of those made in the image of God? What does being made in the image of God entail, anyway? And so we praise Jesus, and it makes us look good. It makes us look righteous and faithful and good Christians.

Instead, I Suggest We Emulate Christ, but We're not Very Good at That

We're not very good at it. We're sort of rusty. We haven't been practicing. But let's heal one another. Let's channel the Holy Spirit to bring miracles to one another. Let's have the right word for one another in situations that are tense or angry or fearful.

That right word was like when Jesus was dealing with the prostitute about to be stoned. "Whoever is first among you, cast the first stone." One sentence, and he defused the entire situation. Everybody just sort of sneaked away.

We have that ability too, to have the right word in a tense situation, in a fearful situation, in an angry or violent situation.

Let us also remind one another about the word and deed and presence of who we really are as children of God, as a temple of God, made in the image of God, and stop putting ourselves down.

Addendum

It has been noted that, in the body of this sermon, I didn't really answer my own question: Is Jesus of a different order of being than the rest of humanity?

Fine, rational, articulate, and Biblically-based responses could be made for either a Yes or a No answer. Personally, I lean toward the No answer. I believe that, in virtually every area of human endeavor, there are some people who are beginners, some passable, some adept, some expert, some genuinely gifted, and a few who are clearly geniuses. This is true of baseball players, dancers, mechanics, novelists, orators, painters, scientists, and surgeons of every discipline.

In the area of spirit — that is, spiritual sensitivity, awareness, insight, and raw intelligence — I believe Jesus was a genius. Arguably (and unfortunately there is a lot of argument on this), every single miracle ever performed by Jesus has been replicated by other humans. The Roman Catholic Church has centuries of experience in discerning them. But it should be noted that those replications were performed not just by "ordinary" humans, but generally by spiritually advanced humans.

Thus, I feel that Jesus should be admired, emulated, and followed, in the sense of "pioneer and perfecter" of our faith, but neither venerated nor worshiped. Being human like us then gives an honesty, and a deep hopefulness, to his saying that "greater things than these" shall you do.

Amen.