

Messiah Moravian Church

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Last Sunday After The Epiphany & Transfiguration Sunday

Dane Perry

## **PETER GETS IT RIGHT**

What are we to make of this Transfiguration event?

For a biblical literalist, it would be easy: the event is in the Bible, and therefore it occurred exactly as Luke describes. He tells a luminous story of a literal mystical encounter, in which supernatural light surrounds and emanates from Jesus, his physical appearance changes, famous spiritual leaders come back from the dead and God speaks a direct command from an all-encompassing cloud.

For a follower of the Jesus Seminar scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan, who attempted to determine the historicity of the deeds, events and sayings of Jesus, one would interpret the Transfiguration as a metaphorical, symbolic literary device of Luke. Gospel writers were not journalists reporting historical or factually accurate news. They were persuaders attempting to convince their readers of Jesus's radically new concept of messiahship.

Yet something happened on that mountaintop, something so important that Matthew, Mark, Luke and Peter included it in their writings. To prepare for this message, I read lots of sermons and commentaries on the passage, hoping to find a personally satisfying understanding of the event. I confess that I was not terribly successful.

But a more important question is, what relevance does this passage have for us. The majority of those sermons and commentaries I just mentioned seemed to proclaim one or two main themes, which I suspect that you have heard before. On the one hand, some sermons look disparagingly at impulsive, witless Peter who once again gets things backwards about Jesus by wanting to preserve the mountaintop experience forever. They emphasize that discipleship isn't about adoring glory or living on the mountaintop; rather, it's about going back down the mountain into the grit and grind of everyday life to care for the sick, feed the hungry, cloth the naked.

A second common theme keeps the focus on Peter by encouraging us to identify with him. Peter is the impetuous disciple quick to speak without thinking, the one whose ambition often falls short of his courage. These sermons remind us that Peter is just like us: a foolish, imperfect follower who fails at his faith as frequently as he succeeds. And yet, Jesus loves him--and by extension, loves us--and builds his church on him--and us.

Go down the mountain, back into "real life" or look at Peter, he's just like us. Perhaps those are exactly the meanings that Jesus or Luke or God meant for us to get from the story but it is important to note that the passage itself does not say any of those things. Instead, it describes something far beyond normal human experience.

So I found it fascinating that one commentator noted this is the only instance in any of the Gospels where Jesus doesn't respond at all to something that someone says to him. If Peter's exclamation is another example of how he always gets it wrong, then when he confesses, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah,"

why doesn't Jesus rebuff, rebuke or correct him, as Jesus has done other times? I began to wonder if Jesus doesn't respond because, more or less, Peter is right.

How can Peter be right? In a moment of clarity Peter sees that the humanity of Jesus is suffused with the eternal glory of God, and in that moment Peter glimpses the mystery of our faith: God became human so that humanity might become like God. What Peter sees is, God became like us. What Peter eventually learns is, we might become like God, and that is the very essence and purpose of Christian discipleship.

Peter is right: it is good, always and everywhere, to worship and adore God who became human, and, in seeing him, we see ourselves offered a similar glory. Just as Christ's humanity is transfigured by glory without ceasing to be human, so too will our humanity be called into union with God, to be exalted, without ceasing to be creatures of this world, worldly creatures who bear God's light and reflect God's love back into our world.

In Robert Fulghum's book *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, he writes about his professor Alexandros Papaderos. "At the last session on the last morning of a two-week seminar on Greek culture, Dr. Papaderos turned and asked: 'Are there any questions?'"

Quiet settled over the room. 'No questions?' Papaderos swept the room with his eyes. So, I asked, 'Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?' The expected laughter followed, and people started to get up and leave. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time.

" 'I will answer your question.' Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter.

" 'When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a German motorcycle mirror. It was not possible to find all the pieces, so I kept the largest piece, this one. By scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it and became fascinated that I could reflect light into dark, inaccessible places where the sun would never shine, such as deep holes, crevices and dark closets.

" 'As I was growing up, I continued the challenge of the reflecting game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but also a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the source of light. But truth, understanding, and knowledge are the "light" of creation and will only shine in dark places if I reflect it.

" 'I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world and into the black places in the hearts of people and change things in them. Perhaps others may see me and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.'

"And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the classroom windows and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk."

Yes, Peter is right that it's good to be there on the mountain, adoring the transfigured Christ. What Peter gets wrong is thinking he needs to build three tabernacles. Maybe Elijah and Moses need them, but not Jesus. Jesus's flesh, his humanity, is already the tabernacle.