

Title: Baptized for Transfiguration
Date: 2/19/2023 (Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Exodus 24:12-18](#); [2 Peter 1:16-21](#); [Matthew 17:1-9](#); [Psalm 2](#); [Psalm 99](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/-pPQbtNuADk?t=1139>

O God, open our hearts and minds so that we not just hear, but truly listen to, your well-beloved Son. May the light of his countenance strengthen us so that we may bear our cross and change us so that we bear the glory of his likeness. Amen.

Happy Transfiguration Sunday!

How many of you have had what you would consider a peak spiritual experience?

Raise your hand if you went looking for it.

- ...if it was something that just happened.
- ...if it actually happened on a mountain.
- ...if it happened in a church.
- ...if it happened in the wilderness.

Where else?

Some time in the next few months, I'd love to hear all of your stories, and I'd love it if you'd share those stories with each other.

The last Sunday after Epiphany is known as Transfiguration Sunday because of the gospel reading you just heard.

After a very long hike up the mountain, Jesus undergoes an amazing transformation right in front of Peter, James, and John. His face shines like the sun, not from the sweat. His clothes are dazzling white, instead of what *my* clothes would look like after a long hike.

The term "transfiguration" is used to refer to this change in form or appearance.¹

It's an interesting move, because Jesus didn't need to undergo this physical change for Peter, James, and John to know that they were following someone special. In the gospel, this takes place not long after Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Mt 16:16) and six days after Jesus first told them that he will go to Jerusalem, and he will be killed and on the third day be raised to life (Mt 16:21).

The Bible doesn't say this, but I imagine that the disciples are having a hard time with that news. So, it makes sense that Peter wants to build these tents. He wants to keep the Son of the Living God close by. He wants his teacher, his friend, to stay.

As he was making those plans, a voice from the clouds interrupted him.

Peter, James, and John had taken the bright clothes and the shining face in stride. But when they heard that voice, fear overcame them, and they fell to the ground. Their minds had been filled with human concerns, like building tents, and the voice reminded them that they were part of something bigger, something harder to predict and make sense of, something of God's.

The Sundays in the season of Epiphany began with the story of Jesus' baptism and end with the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. This puts him on the road to his death and resurrection, but that's a sermon for Ash Wednesday, or the first Sunday of Lent.

Today, we're still on the top of the mountain.

What does this mountain top experience tell us?

This is a story we read every year, and this year, three details from today's gospel reading stand out; they draw a line from our baptism to the Transfiguration of Jesus. They are reminders that baptism is an invitation to transformation. It sets us on a path to something bigger, something harder to predict and make sense of, something of God's.

The three details are the clothes, the face, and the company.

First, the clothes.

Jesus's clothes are dazzling white. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, "[A]ll of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal 3:27). Parents almost always dress babies and toddlers in white for their baptism. In some churches, the sponsors help the newly baptized put on robes like this one after they have been baptized. Those of us who serve at the altar wear these robes over our normal clothes. This shows that no matter how different we are from each other, we are one in Christ (Gal 3:28), because we have clothed ourselves with Christ.

There are lots of paintings and sculptures and stained-glass windows of Jesus. I think it's pretty safe to say that we don't wear what he wears in any other story but this one, and definitely not what he wears, or doesn't wear, at his baptism in the Jordan River. What we wear at our baptism reflects what he wears after his transfiguration. It is a promise of how we can become one body, differences and all, with God's help.

Second, the face.

Jesus' face shone like the sun. The writers of the gospels use this detail as a callback to the book of Exodus. As Moses came down Mt. Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God (Ex 34:29), and it shone in such a way that Aaron and the Israelites were afraid to come near him (Ex 34:30). Jesus, the Son of God, is even closer to God. His face shone like the sun, but not in a way that caused the disciples to be afraid.

At baptism, we light a candle from the Paschal candle, the Easter candle, and hand it to the newly baptized. Jesus is the light of the world, and this reminds us that we have received the light of Christ. Then it's up to us to figure out how to let that light shine through our life. It's the changes in *our* form and appearance that signal to others that we have been transformed by our encounter with God. It's changes like these that invite them to undergo their *own* transformation.

Third, the company.

Once Jesus has undergone his transfiguration, the disciples see him talking with Moses and Elijah, the symbols of law and prophecy. When we become part of the body of Christ, we join *their* ongoing conversation about what those laws and prophecies means for us in this day and age. Just as Gentiles joined the long-running conversation between God and the people of Israel, with humility we recognize that we are simply the latest to engage in these age-old questions, and we have a lot to learn.

As members of the body of Christ, we join the communion of saints, the people who have wrestled with how to translate Scripture from words into action for their times. We study their words and learn from their stories. These are people who have struggled to not just hear Jesus but to truly listen to him and follow in his footsteps. They don't just exist in the past or on a pedestal, they are all around us.

We may not always succeed, just as Moses and Elijah didn't always get it. We may not know as much as we want or have more doubts than we think we should. But if we stop engaging, if we stop asking questions, the light will never shine in those dark places. So, we keep turning back to Scripture, to the laws and prophecies, next to other people of faith. The company we keep will guide and transform us, and in turn we will transform this body.

It's been interesting to hold these readings in my mind this week as we've been cleaning up the church building and the Assembly Room so that we can worship here today.

Moments like this, weeks like this, show us who we are and who we are on our way toward becoming. My heart jumped for joy every time I saw a car pull up, and y'all just kept coming. It wasn't just because many hands make the work go quickly or make the weight of the responsibility a little lighter.

It was because working side by side gives us the opportunity to be in each other's company. We get to shine a light for one another, and to experience our church community through a different light.

It hints at what we can become when we come together as the body of Christ, each with our tools and gifts and mountain top experiences. Moments like this add up over time. Moments like this transform all the members, and the body as a whole.

We keep having moments like this, and then one day, a voice from the clouds, or a voice from this community, or a voice from this neighborhood, will put words to what we have become.

“Oh, you're from St. Alban's? St. Alban's is a place where... The people of St. Alban's are...”

I don't know how those blanks will be filled in yet, but it will be something bigger than we can imagine, something harder to predict and make sense of, something of God's.

Let's discover the answer together.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zvxtgwx/revision/10>