

Transfiguration

A brilliant magician was performing on an ocean liner. But every time he did a trick, the Captain's parrot would yell, "It's a trick. He's a phony. That's not magic." Then one evening during a storm, the ship sank while the magician was performing. The parrot and the magician ended up in the same lifeboat. For several days they just glared at each other, neither saying a word to the other. Finally the parrot said, "OK, I give up. What did you do with the ship?" The parrot couldn't explain it! It was too much to comprehend, even for a smart parrot.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Scholars over the years have tried to explain what Peter meant by this suggestion. It's simply the way Matthew explains: Peter was frightened and he just said the first thing that came into his head. It's like he was saying *I don't know how you got Moses & Elijah here!* Let's build three booths, stay here for a while and enjoy your success. He just could not comprehend what was happening.

You go into the movie theater, find a suitable seat, clamber over some poor people in the aisle seats, being careful not to step on toes or lose your balance. You find a place for your coat, sit down, and get ready to watch the movie. The house lights dim; the speakers crackle and an image appears on the screen. It is not the film you came to see. It is the preview of coming attractions, a brief glimpse of the highlights of a film opening soon. The movie makers and theater owners hope the preview will pique your interest enough to make you want to come back and see the whole film.

On the Mount of the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John, the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, were given a preview of coming attractions. And today, on the Festival of the Transfiguration, we are given a preview of Jesus in divine glory, his mortal nature brilliantly - if not only momentarily - transfigured; a dazzling preview of his divinity, unblemished and perfectly pure, shining in glory like the very sun or *Dazzling White* as the Gospel writer puts it.

A sneak preview, in other words, of Easter, the triumphant culmination of the epic love story between God and humankind. But like the preview in the movie theater, this is not the film that is showing today. It hasn't opened yet; it can't be seen in its entirety. Only a glimpse to arouse interest and stimulate curiosity. Those whose interest is piqued will have to wait, will have to come back.

Peter, for one, thinks that's a bad deal. This is the big picture he's been waiting to see. He's viewed enough of the melodramatic healings and documentaries featuring Jesus the teacher.

Peter's recent confrontation with Jesus over the rabbi's depressing talk about rejection and suffering and dying is still fresh on his mind. His soul still stings from his master's words,

"Get behind me, Satan, for you are not on the side of God but of mortals." Peter doesn't want any more of that kind of talk, no more of that kind of picture. He wants action, - big, bold, spectacular action! This vision on the mountain, with the Top Stars - Jesus, Moses and Elijah in celestial conversation, *this* is more like it. This is what he had hoped for ever since he dropped his fisherman's nets and hitched his wagon to the rabbi's rising star. "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory" will soon become "*Mine* is the kingdom and the power and the glory" if he can only get these giants of the faith to let him hang out with them. So naturally he offers to build three booths, three dwellings -- it's a way to prolong the moment, build some permanent lodging - forget the main feature about to be played out and jump ahead to the feature he and the others are only previewing.

I was at a Lutheran Cluster meeting this past week and the topic of church names came up. While looking at this weeks Gospel lessons, someone commented that they didn't know of a "Transfiguration Lutheran Church." I said there is one in Pottstown. Someone mentioned that instead of Transfiguration Lutheran Church, it could be called "Three Booths Lutheran Church." I did a search on the Web, and there are only 8 "Transfiguration Lutheran Churches" in the entire E.L.C.A. "Trinity Lutheran Church"? There are 740. "St. John"? 628. "St. Peter's Lutheran church"? 184. But there are only 8 Transfiguration Lutheran Churches in the entire E.L.C.A.

Every Church - even if not *named* it - should *be* a Church of Transfiguration. A Church that is constantly Changing, Growing, becoming something new and exciting! A church where - like with the previews - make you want to see what is to come! But there are many times when instead of a church *seizing* the moment - they simply want to FREEZE the moment. It's usually some moment of glory in the congregation's life, some fond memory of a person, a practice, a program or an event.

A pastor friend of mine told me of when he ran into this type of situation. He said, "When I came to my last congregation as Associate Pastor, I collected some bruises as a result of running headlong into a few "figurative" booths that had been erected along the way. One I remember especially well. It had to do with a particularly cohesive group of young people who had just graduated from high school, and concluding their involvement in the congregation's youth group. This was a special group: they were blessed and they were a blessing. People recalled their energy, their enthusiasm and their commitment with obvious and appropriate fondness. And then some would go on to say, 'There will never be another youth group as good as that one.'

Wham! Peter couldn't have built a better booth himself!" We know a moment of glory when we see one, and when we see one, we want to seize one; and when we seize it - we want

to freeze it. It's a real no-brainer to figure out the effect that particular booth had on the youth who were left behind, struggling to become a group themselves. That booth may as well have had the shape of a coffin, because it effectively killed youth ministry in that congregation for about a year or so. Nobody meant to do that. It's just that our instincts, like those of Peter, make us go for the glory and revel in it and hope it will go on forever, and be disappointed when it passes, as inevitably it must, to make way for God's new thing.

It is a temptation for the church to become a religious museum, to highlight the “Good Old Days” - for its leaders to become curators and caretakers, with energies diverted and devoted to the institutionalization of the past, especially moments of glory past. That can be especially tempting for a congregation such as ours that had a vital Role in the American Revolution. We have flags hanging from our center beam in recognition of all those who occupied our facility during that triumphant time in our country's history. Every 4th of July we have a Colonial Heritage Program to highlight our Historical Significance. Could this be “one of our Booths”? And if you tell someone that you attend worship here at St. Peter's -eventually you will run into someone who says: “Oh - the Boar's Head Church”. An event that has gone on here for over the past 27 years. Gee - did they do ANYTHING during the 224 years prior to the beginning of the Boar's Head Festival? I knew this was a potential Booth during my first month as the pastor here. I attended the Boar's Head Meeting. Unknowingly - I asked a Question. WOW! All eyes turned toward me with body language that said, “YOU have no authority to ask any questions here. This is OUR program - and you're the New Kid.” I definitely saw that this could be one of those booths within the congregation. But over time - as you've come to “know me and love me” I was even welcomed into *this* aspect of our ministry.

But even within the Boar's Head Festival within the 12 productions I've been in we have had three different Josephs over the years. Each time one left there was moaning and groaning what will we do? And each time the new Joseph brought a new and fresh approach to this important role, and the same thing just happened this year. Instead of a church seizing the moment, they simply want to freeze the moment.

We can be tempted to stay within those Mountain Top Experiences. We can be like Peter and never want to leave. But God has designed the universe so that time marches on. Moments of glory fade. Exciting previews of coming attractions end and the real story we came to see unfolds. We know that God wants us to move forward, past the previews of what we can be, and forward to what we will be. We are marching into a new chapter of history in the life of our congregation. Another Congregational meeting is behind us. Entering into a New Building is ahead of us. We have a Building Dedication Service schedule for April 6th. We will commemorate our history again at this year's Colonial Heritage program. We are already planning next year's Boar's Head Festival.

Our past “Transfiguration Mountaintop Experiences” are good for us to witness God at work among us - and those Transfigurations should lead to Transformations - Transforming us

past what we *know* we can do - and compels us to new ministries that God places before us. All of which brings us back to those six men on the mountain, and the voice from the cloud. This particular preview of God's coming attraction is related to the main feature that is about to unfold. God's voice from the cloud confirms it. For when that voice declares, "This is my son; listen to him," Jesus' disciples, then and now, do well to obey. Listen to him. What is he saying? He just got finished talking about how he must be rejected and suffer and die.

That's what we need to hear. The glory will come. The Transfiguration is a preview. But first we have to have the main attraction. Wednesday begins the first day of Lent, the season that leads up to the celebration of Easter. That is the Big Event - the Main Attraction. That is what Jesus was previewing on the Mountain for Peter, James and John. Our Trans-figuration is in the preview that the Risen Christ WILL come again. Until that day comes we follow the same instructions Peter, James & John received when God said, "**This is my son; listen to him!**" Amen