

What preachers get wrong and Peter gets right about the Transfiguration

If Peter is wrong in his response to his mountaintop spiritual experience—as so many sermons suggest—why doesn't Jesus rebuke him?

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The Transfiguration is this Sunday, a scene that many preachers (color me guilty) get wrong, but Peter (no matter how many times we make him the patsy in the story) gets right.

Here's a transfigured Transfiguration sermon.

Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

If you've ever sat through more than a handful of sermons, or endured even a couple of mine, then chances are you already know how the preaching from this point on the mountaintop is supposed to go.

I'm supposed to point the finger at Peter and chalk this episode up as yet another example of obtuse, dunder-tongued Peter getting Jesus bassakwards. I'm expected to chide Peter for wanting to preserve this spiritual, mountaintop experience.

From there, preaching on the Transfiguration is permitted to go in one of two ways.

I'm allowed to pivot from Peter's foolish gesture to the (supposedly sophisticated) observation that discipleship isn't about adoring glory or mountaintop experiences; no, it's about going back down the mountain, into the grit and the grind of everyday life, where we can feed the hungry and cloth the naked and do everything else upper middle class Christians aren't embarrassed to affirm.

Or, rather than pivot to the poor, I can keep the sermon focused on Peter. I can encourage you to identify with Peter, the disciple whose mouth is always quicker than his mind and whose ambition never measures up to his courage. I could preach Peter to you and comfort you that Peter's just like you: a foolish, imperfect follower who fails at his faith as often as he gets it right. And, yet, Jesus loves him (and you) and builds his church on him.

That's how you preach this text: go back down the mountaintop, back into 'real life.' Or, look at Peter—he's just like you.

Given the way sermons on the Transfiguration always go, you'd think these are the only two options allowed.

Except, as cliched as those interpretations are, they're not without their problems.

For one: I just spent the last year fighting stage-serious cancer, during which time I wasn't able to go much of anywhere or do much of anything much less venture out into the world's hurt, roll up my sleeves, and serve the poor. I wasn't strong enough to do that kind of thing anymore.

So discipleship can't merely be a matter of going back down the mountain because such a definition excludes a great many disciples, including me.

For another, if this is nothing more than another example of how obtuse Peter is, how Peter always manages to get it wrong, then when Peter professes, "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 correct him? Why doesn't Jesus rebuff Peter and say: 'No, it is good for us to go back down the mountain to serve the least, the lost, and the lonely?'

Why doesn't Jesus scold Peter? "Peter, it's not about spiritual experiences, the Son of Man came to serve."

If Peter's offer is such a grave temptation, then why doesn't Jesus exhort him like he does elsewhere and say: 'Get behind me, Satan?'

If Peter is so wrong, then why doesn't Jesus respond by rebuking Peter?

In fact, here on the mountaintop, it's the only instance in any of the Gospels where Jesus doesn't respond at all to something someone has said to him. This is the only

instance where Jesus doesn't respond.

I wonder: **what if Jesus doesn't respond because, more or less, Peter's right?**

Ludwig Feuerbach, an awesomely bearded 19th century critic of religion, accused Christians that all our theology is really only anthropology. Rather than talking about God, as we claim, we're in fact only speaking about ourselves in a loud voice.

There's perhaps no better proof of Feuerbach's accusation than our propensity to make Peter the point of this scripture. To make this theophany, anthropology. To transfigure this story into something ordinary.

Just think, what would Peter make of the fact that so many preachers like me make Peter the subject of our preaching? Which is but a way making ourselves the focus of this story.

Don't forget that this is the same Peter who insisted that he was not worthy to die in the same manner as Christ and so asked to be crucified upside down.

More than any of us, Peter would know that he should not be the subject of our sermons. Peter would know that he's not the one we should be looking at in this scene.

I wonder: does Jesus not respond because what Peter gets right, even if he doesn't know exactly what he's saying, is that gazing upon Christ, who is charged with the uncreated light of God, *is* good?

Not only is it good, all the sermons to the contrary to the contrary, it is the essence of discipleship.

Indeed in this image of the transfigured Christ Peter sees the life of all lives flash before his eyes. In one instant of transfigured clarity, Peter sees the humanity of Jesus suffused with the eternal glory of God, and in that instant Peter glimpses the mystery of our faith: that God became human so that humanity might become like God.

This is where the good news is to be found.

Not in Peter being as dumb or scared as you and me.

Not in a message like 'serve the poor' that you would still agree to even if you knew not Christ.

No, the good news is found in the same glory that transfigured the face of Moses and dwelt in the Temple and rested upon the ark and overshadowed Mary pervading even Jesus' humanity and also, one day, ours.

God became like us, that's what Peter sees; so that, we might become like God, that's what Peter eventually learns.

The light that radiates from Jesus' flesh is the same light that said 'Let there be...'
It's the same light that the world awaits with groaning and labor pains and sighs too deep for words. It's the light that will one day make all of creation a burning bush, afire with God's glory but not consumed by it.

Peter's right. It is right and good, always and everywhere, to worship and adore God became man, and, in seeing him, to see ourselves taken up into that same glory.

It is right and good, always and everywhere, to anticipate our flesh being remade into God's image so that we may be united with God.

It is good, for 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 deified, without our ceasing to be creatures.

That's the plot of scripture. That's the mystery of our faith.

Not only is Peter right, all the other sermons on this passage go in the wrong direction. It's not about going back down the mountain. Rather the entire Christian life is a sort of ascent, venturing further and further up the mountain, to worship and adore the transfigured Christ and, in so doing, to be transfigured ourselves.

If we're not transformed, what's the point of going back down the mountain? We'd be down there, no different than anyone else, which leaves the world no different than its always been.

You can almost ask Jesus. Peter's right.

What Peter gets wrong isn't that it's good to be there adoring the transfigured Christ. What Peter gets wrong is thinking he needs to build *three* tabernacles.

Elijah and Moses maybe could've used them, but not Jesus. Jesus' flesh, his humanity, is the tabernacle.

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