



Transfigured. Transformed. They are really the same thing, aren't they? Actually, no, although we often think about them as the same. We use transformed in conversation far more often than we use the word transfigured.¹ Perhaps because "transfigured" is not as *friendly* a word as "transformed". It sounds a bit mysterious and too "high church" for some.

One of children's favorite toys is a transformer where the goal is to make one thing into another. Same parts and pieces but the end result is different. The Last Knight Legion Class Bumblebee figure can be changed from a

robot into a Chevrolet Camaro in 4 easy steps claims the box. Maybe for some but I have a feeling I would promptly fail the 4 step process if my past with Rubik cubes is anything to go by. A transformer can be changed from one recognizable figure into another. Someone transformed moves away from a past life- perhaps a life that included abuse of drugs or alcohol into a sober person – not to say the transformation is easy or that it doesn't take day-by-day attention to what was destructive behavior in the past and what is positive about the transformation. We breathe a sigh of relief that I don't have to worry about you in quite the same way anymore because you are now transformed from a burden on society into a productive member of society. Or, at least, that's the hope and the prayer.

If I were to ask you about another example of transformation or metamorphosis, perhaps the image most of us would bring to mind is the caterpillar turning into the butterfly. What goes in is definitely not what comes out. The two are related but you would almost have to know that beforehand to see in the butterfly the original caterpillar.

Basic, fundamental change in you who are from what you were is implied in the terms transformed or metamorphosis. In one of the fancy words I love, we might say that transformation reflects an ontological change: your very being is changed. Transfiguration means something fundamental is different.

A couple of hymns reflect this including "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory" v. 4:

In the beauty of the lilies
Christ was born across the sea,
with a glory in his bosom
that transfigures you and me;
as he died to make men holy,
let us die to make men free,
while God is marching on.

Or the hymn named simply, Transfiguration Hymn. The lyrics to the first two verses give us Ken Bible's interpretation of our Gospel text:

¹ With thanks to: <http://episcopalhospitalchaplain.blogspot.com/2008/02/transfigured-not-transformed.html> (8/4/17) and <https://entangledstates.org/2013/08/06/transfiguration-not-transformation/> (8/4/17)

See our Lord in all His glory,
Now arrayed in dazzling white!
See Him shine in holy splendor,
Bathed in everlasting light!
See the law and prophets gather,
Lifting high the Living Christ!
Lifting high the Living Christ!

See the cloud of ancient fire
Guiding through our wilderness.
Hear the voice of God our Father.
Hear the love His words express:
This my Son is pure and pleasing.
Hear the blessing that He brings!
Hear the blessing that He brings!²

Transformation, then, suggests what went in is not what comes out. There is an ontological change in the person or the event.

Transfiguration, though, is different. Scholars suggest that what was particularly important about the transfiguration is that Peter, James and John saw Jesus and knew him for who he was both before being transfigured and after. What the transfiguration meant to them perhaps is that they may also have understood how Jesus was both fully human and full divine. Of course, this is speculation since we don't have text that tells us the reaction of Peter, James and John other than they kept silent.

The Gospel story of the transfiguration occurs in Matthew, Mark and Luke- our three synoptic gospels. The importance of the story to those first century Christians is noted in part by the fact that this event occurs in all three. The telling of the transfiguration is slightly different though in each reflecting the needs of the community to which that particular gospel was addressed.

All three include that Jesus talked to Moses and Elijah. Moses the prophet who brought the law, or God's teaching, to the Israelites. Elijah the prophet who was taken up to heaven while Elisha watched. Moses and Elijah are the two most important prophets within the Jewish tradition. Another time we can explore the importance of Elijah each year at the Jewish Seder.

For today, though, it is important that Jesus is seen in company of the two most important prophets for the Jewish people. It is important that Peter, James and John see and witness the conversation between the two prophets and Jesus. Who knows what Jesus, Moses and Elijah talked about – wouldn't that be interesting to ask if we get the chance someday?

Another thing to consider is that Peter, James and John go on to have incredibly important roles in bringing the church into being and in that way are important to our being here today. Peter as the rock on which Jesus will build the church. Peter the one who publically doubts and so often seems to miss what Jesus is saying. There's hope for all of us if Peter can be tasked with bringing something as important as the church into the world despite his human failings!

² <http://www.lnwhymns.com/Hymn.aspx?ID=177#> (8/4/17)

James, the brother of Jesus. The one who will lead the church in Jerusalem after Jesus has ascended into heaven. James the author of the Letter of James found in our New Testament. James, the brother of Jesus, gives us continuity and reminds us of the importance of family to our lives.

And then there is John. The beloved disciple. The one who, in the Gospel of John, is entrusted with caring for Mary, the mother of Jesus, following Jesus' death. Again, as with Peter and James, we see the importance of community in the life of believers, in the life of the church.

Jesus does not go up the mountain alone. He does not come down the mountain alone. And Peter, James and John see what they never expected to see because they followed Jesus. Just like Peter, James and John, we may not know what we will experience if we follow Jesus.

Marshall Scott, an Episcopal hospital chaplain writes about this Gospel passage:

What strikes me about that is that we sometimes hear about the "transformative power of the Gospel," and never about its "transfigurative power." I have long felt some concern about that. Those who use it most seem to have all too clear an idea what the believer is to be transformed into, without much sense that God may have a broader sense of the possibilities. In any case, they do seem committed to "transformation" rather than "transfiguration:" a change in who the person is instead of the same person fully reflecting the glory of God.

But Jesus was transfigured, not transformed. ... We might say they saw "the real Jesus," in seeing him as he could be seen in the Kingdom; but he was still the same Jesus they'd walked with up the mountain. He wasn't somehow a different sort of being.

By the same token, living in the light of the Lord doesn't transform us, doesn't make us more or less human. However, it can transfigure us. Our appearance can be changed, before both God and human folk. We, too, can reflect the light, the glory of the Lord; and with time and discipline we can reflect that glory more brightly. We don't expect to be fully transfigured until we meet again in the Kingdom; but in the meantime we can work on our own capacity to reflect the glory of God.

Peter, James, and John went up the mountain with Jesus, and saw him transfigured. When they came down the mountain, he was the same Jesus; but they had seen him, literally, in a new light. We are called to reflect the presence of Christ within us. And we're called to do that, not by becoming someone or something we are not already, but by allowing the light of Christ that shines on us to reflect from us out into a dark and weary world.

Amen.