

“Fast Car”

The Transfiguration of Jesus is an important event in the revelation of his divinity to his inner circle of disciples. Peter, James and John are his closest followers and he chooses to take them with him to witness his transformation. On the mountain top he encounters the great prophets Moses and Elijah. Moses was not only the leader who brought the Hebrew people out of captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land. He is also considered to be the proto-prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures. His encounters with YHWH in the burning bush and on Mt. Sinai set the pattern for all of the Hebrew prophets that follow him. This includes Elijah the greatest of the prophets.

He is considered the greatest of the Hebrew prophets for a number of reasons. He raised the son of the Widow of Zarephath from the dead. He defends YHWH against Baal worship that has intruded on Israel through Jezebel the queen and wife of King Ahab. He does so by proving the amassed prophets of Baal to be false and their god Baal to be a sham. He does this through a fiery display before the king, queen and the people of Israel. He is so successful in the display that he convinces the people of Israel who shout "The LORD—he is God; the LORD—he is God." He follows this with the destruction of the false prophets despite being outnumbered 450 to 1. After other adventures Elijah departs this world not by death but by being swept up into the heavens in a whirlwind. Later the prophet Malachi declares that Elijah will return before the Day of Lord. Thus there is always an empty seat left for Elijah at Passover Seder tables, should this be the year he returns.

We see the importance of Jesus encountering these two men on the mountaintop as a way to validate his ministry. God tops it off by declaring to all within hearing, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” A declaration similar to what Jesus heard after he is baptized by John in the River Jordan. The disciples are stunned, wouldn’t you be, and are often depicted in art as having fallen to the ground.

While this Transfiguration may seem beyond belief I think we can witness similarly powerful transfigurations if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

For example, I want to share with you a passage from a book I am reading entitled *Enchantment*. In it the author, Katherine May, describes her exploration of the forest near her home. She writes:

The forest...is a deep terrain, a place of unending variance and subtle meaning. It is a complete sensory environment, whispering with sounds that nourish rather than enervate, with scents that carry information more significant than “nasty” or “nice.” It is different each time you meet it, changing with the season, the weather, the life cycles of its inhabitants. It is marked by history and mythologies; stories effortlessly spin from its depths. It is safe from the spite of suburban playgrounds, and dangerous in a way that insurance won’t indemnify. Dig beneath its soil, and you will uncover layers of life: the frail networks of mycelia, the burrows of animals, the roots of trees.¹

As she continues, think of what the disciples experienced on that mountain and how it changed their perceptions not only of Jesus, but of God, and of life itself:

Bring questions into this space and you will receive a reply, though not an answer. Deep terrain offers up multiplicity, forked paths, symbolic meaning. It schools you in compromise, in shifting interpretation. It will mute your rationality and make you believe in magic. It removes time from the clock face and reveals

¹ Katherine May, *Enchantment: Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age* [New York: Riverdale Books, 2023] p.34

the greater truth of its operation, its circulatory and its vastness. It will show you rocks of unfathomable age and bursts of life so ephemeral that they are barely there. It will show you the crawl of geological ages, the gradual change of the season, and the countless micro-seasons that happen across the years. It will demand your knowledge: the kind of knowledge that's experiential, the kind of knowledge that comes with study. Know it—name it—and it will reward you only with more layers of detail, more frustrating revelations of your own ignorance. A deep terrain is a life's work. It will beguile, nourish, and sustain you through decades, only to finally prove that you, too, are ephemeral compared to the rocks and the trees.²

Her words “deep terrain” stand in for Transfiguration as we hear this passage. For Transfiguration offers up replies without definite answers, multiplicity, forked paths, symbolic meaning, and shifting interpretation. Transfiguration mutes our rationality, removes time from clock faces, and reveals greater truth and vastness. It shows us unfathomable ages and ephemeral life. It demands experiential knowledge with revelations of our ignorance. Transfiguration is the beguiles, nourishes, and sustains life's work. Forests can transfigure us as surely as Jesus was transfigured on that holy mountain.

Another example of transfiguration that I encountered this week happened at, of all places, The Grammys. A place where outrageousness is often the byword of the night. Instead, there was a moment of subtly and harmony, both real and figurative, that transfigured the performers and keeps me coming back again and again to watch it happen. It was the performance of a song from 1988. It is a song of a young woman's longing for a better life and the urban despair that seems to thwart her. It is heartbreakingly simple in its music and powerful in its words. It is a song by a black singer, song writer that captivated a little boy in rural North Carolina so completely that he has played it his whole life. He finally recorded it and it became a hit song all over again, but this time on the country music charts. He is so faithful to the song that he does not change any of the pronouns, singing with a gruff country baritone.

These two musicians of different backgrounds and generations sang this song together on the Grammys. To watch them perform it is to see two people transfigured. Watch their faces and their body language. Watch as he mouths the words while she sings. See the glow on her face as she plays. See the audience who know they are watching something miraculous happening on stage. Watch how the singers reverence each other at the end of the song. No showboating. No shocking gestures. No revealing outfits. Two people black and white, urban and rural, not at odds but in respectful harmony. No flash or pyrotechnics. Just love for each other and love for the music. They were transfigured and I feel transfigured each time I watch their performance.³

Too often we “think it happened once and long ago.”⁴ If we approach the world wide-eyed like the author in the forest we have the opportunity to see deeply into what God is showing us. In a country that so desperately needs symbols of togetherness and accord across races, beliefs and generations, we can find it in the most unlikely places if we are open to what God is doing in the world over against human manufactured war, discord, violence and disillusionment. We have to make a decision to live in the love of God or die in despair. Let us choose life and love and the hope that comes with being transfigured.

² Ibid, p. 35.

³ Watch it for yourself at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz3nJKW9eTM>

⁴ Thanks to the poet Marie Howe for her poem “You think it happened once, and long ago.”