

-One of my earliest childhood memories is being a part of this big, ruckus, preschool aged children's choir that gave a Christmas program/concert at my home congregation (Westwood Lutheran Church) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Ofcourse, being around the age of 5, my memory of this is a little spotty. But, the biggest thing I remember feeling was an uneasiness of putting on choir robes. This program, whatever it was, encompassed some costumes and props as well as robes for the kids in the choir.

-Ofcourse, my 5 year old brain most likely didn't think it through very well, but I specifically remember the emotion of fear. What did these choir robes and costumes do to you? Did they change who you were? Did it mean that you had to do crazy things that you didn't want to do? Did it mean that I wasn't going to be "Eric" anymore but someone different?

-I have no idea why, but there was some last minute decision made (most likely by some of the parents who didn't want to bother dressing all of these crazy "extra" kids in choir robes) which didn't mean we had to wear robes for the program. I was incredibly relieved by this.

-For liturgical churches, or those congregations who follow some kind of lectionary system in choosing their scripture texts every week, the Sunday of the Transfiguration (which we celebrate today) comes every year. Let me brutally honest: I've never met a pastor in my entire life who has said "Oh you like Christmas, you like Easter, well, I am really looking forward to Transfiguration this year." Maybe they are out there, but I don't know them.

-It's true, this is an incredibly weird story that is hard to know what to do with. Where does one get the "good news" in Jesus going up a mountain, lighting up like a neon sign, hanging out with Moses and Elijah, and then coming back down? It takes a little digging.

-But here is the thing: even in what seems to be a random and weird story, I believe, there are some nuggets hopefully we can take away. I think it all starts with our fear to put the choir robes on.

-My sister-in-law, Hannah, has a wonderful boyfriend named Mark. Mark is incredibly kind, quiet, and reserved kind of guy who most of the time won't really dominate a conversation. You would never guess from his personality that one of the things Mark loves to do is DJ dances and parties (in fact if you ever go to the Plonk wine bar and they have Dj music playing with a guy standing near the door working a mixer, it's probably Mark!) Mark also Dj's for dances at the Badlander (one of the dance clubs downtown) and he was telling me once the science behind picking music for these events. One of the things that works really well is raising the beat of the music by a click every couple songs. Mark is so good at it you can't really tell, but, he chooses or mixes tunes that get progressively faster and faster. The science behind this is the more you

get into dancing (and most of the time beer helps with this), the faster and more intense beat draws you in even more. It's way interesting!

-Not to make too much of a connection with Jesus' Transfiguration and dancing at the Badlander, but there is a similar effect in this story too. The intensity clicks up a little bit: Jesus, Peter, James, and John go up the mountain, they start to pray, Jesus turns bright white, Moses and Elijah appear.....and then... the voice of God comes (similar to Jesus' baptism in Luke with the dove if you remember that). Except this time (this is important), God's statement is slightly changed: "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" Listen to him.

-For me (and I'll be a little bold here), this story is important because it marks the very beginning of the church itself. Throughout all of the earlier chapters, Jesus does a lot of preaching, teaching, and healing which are transformational ofcourse. But the church, the body of Christ, now has its mission stated by God in the Transfiguration story: listen to Jesus. The beat has reached its full intensity.

-So if we are talking about this story less of being some weird "lighting up" story and more of a "birth of the church" story, then we must wrestle with the question: what is the purpose of the church? I've been mulling over this question all week and, to the best of my ability, here is my answer: The purpose of the church is to be an agent of transformation. We are called to transform people into disciples of Christ and we are called to transform the world into the kingdom of God. The Transfiguration story embodies the transfiguration and transformation God seeks in and for this world. The church has, theologically then, a very important role in "listening to Jesus" and helping this transformation happen.

-Now this is a really radical thing for many of us to take in. Let me ask this: how many of us in the pews today are here because you want to be radically changed? If most of us (including myself) were to answer this truthfully, I would wager that this is not the case. Most of us come to church because it is "the same" (you get to see your church family and friends, you do similar liturgy every week, you have similar conversations about the weather, day-to-day activities etc). Churches, in many ways, are institutions that rely on stability and predictability: and most of us probably don't mind this to an extent.

-However, the word "transfiguration" in Greek, however, is one of the most shocking words for change you can get. It is a full transformation (not half-way). Thus, taking this into account, the church's goal in listening to Jesus is helping you be an entirely different being from whom you were before. I don't know about you, but that is pretty radical and scary. I'm not sure if I want to put that choir robe on.

-Many biblical scholars debate whether the lectionary is correct in grouping the Transfiguration story with this healing story of the boy and an evil spirit. I've heard many seminary professors say: "let the Transfiguration speak for itself". Don't include anything else (which is why you'll notice that group of healing the boy verses is in brackets and

listed as “optional” in our *Celebrate* insert today). However, I am a strong proponent for including this story and here’s why: it points to our continued calling to be transformed.

-You gotta come down from the mountain. It can be the greatest and most transformational of all worship experiences or meditations or encounters with the Divine, but at some point you have to come back to the world. You have to face the reality of injustice, death, greed, and sin in the world today. So the final Transfiguration question becomes for us in the church: how do we bring our transformed selves into the world?

-Peter, James, and John came off the mountain and tried to heal but they couldn’t because they had not been transformed/changed. They didn’t get it yet. The disciples were unwilling to be changed at this point.

-Some of you may know that I, along with a group of Lutheran pastors in Missoula are helping to lead worship at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church out on Reserve Street in Missoula. This congregation has been really struggling as of late. Their average Sunday attendance last year was 14 people. Compare this to Our Savior’s 2018 average attendance of 65 and you’ll begin to notice that Prince of Peaces’ sustainability and ability to even afford a pastor is really in question. This is a congregation that is truly facing the question of how to be transformed children of God in the world (more so that probably any other Lutheran congregations currently in our area). Some, of course, want to stay the same church they’ve always been. Some want to re-imagine what ministry looks like. It remains unclear what will happen to Prince of Peace in the future, but perhaps they can be the flashlight for all of us in our struggle to be transformed. Let’s face it: It’s hard for all of us to put the choir robes on. What will it be like to allow ourselves to be changed by Christ? Will we have the courage to help other people transform? How will the world receive us as transfigured church?

-Though it may be weird and uncomfortable, praise God for this Transfiguration story. May it be a story that inspires us to live into being transformed in the Divine, but may it also push us off the mountain and show us how being changed people can be an incredible gift to the world. Amen.