

When I was studying at the seminary, I remember one of my professors took issue with the word “transformation” in the life of faith. She made the convincing case that the word itself was too big, that it was too unrealistic an expectation, setting the bar too high for ordinary people living ordinary lives.

Today we hear a transformation story, a story of illumination and revealing, as Jesus goes up a mountain and is transformed into something beautiful, elevated, luminous, transfigured. The story is really a hinge or a bridge in the life of faith as we now move from the season after Epiphany and into Lent and is the reason that we hear it today.

Some scholars of the New Testament have speculated whether the author we know as Mark misplaced this vision of glory which Peter, James and John are privileged to see and experience. That perhaps this vision of Jesus standing with the two greats of Israel’s history *and* its hoped-for future, Moses - the giver of the law, the teaching, the instruction on how to live as covenant people - and Elijah - the great prophet whose return was expected and whose name was called upon by Israel in times of trouble - that perhaps this story is a misplaced resurrection story and should really have come at the end of Mark’s gospel.

However, like any artist, a writer takes care to use words, images, and stories and place them in specific detail and for a purpose: to communicate meaning and point us to something important, something which we might see or question. In this case in Mark’s gospel, the vision that is revealed to the disciples then, and to us as disciples today, is the promised kingdom of God as seen and experienced in Jesus in his glory on that mountain top; the glory he gave up to cast his lot with us. Mark places it so - and the church placed it so - because it is part of the canvas of faith and it serves as a hinge or bridge to move us into Lent and move with Jesus toward another hill, only this one where a cross stands waiting.

Rembrandt was the master of the selfie. At least, the seventeenth century version of the selfie. Over the course of a prolific career as a painter, etcher, and art dealer, Rembrandt painted or sketched over one hundred

self-portraits. Using a mirror, he would study human expression and emotion in his own face and would teach his students to do the same. Using an Italian technique called chiaroscuro, Rembrandt perfected the use of light and shadow to draw the audience into his paintings where light would fall unevenly or from a particular direction onto something or someone. Rembrandt most often focussed on the face, inviting the observer to participate in the painting, looking at both the light and the shadow and what they might reveal.

In a delightful documentary on CBC's Ideas, art historians at the Rijksmuseum describe the painting of the apostle Paul.¹ In the painting, Rembrandt uses his own face to depict the early church founder and key theologian of the Reformation. They discuss why he would do that in the popular art form of his time depicting biblical scenes. Rembrandt did it for a purpose, they speculated; that he would use his own familiar face to act as a bridge between the biblical world and the world in which he and his contemporaries lived.

In other words, they said, by painting himself into the picture, Rembrandt becomes a conduit for the viewer into the world of Paul by better identifying with the ancient figure with the familiar and at the time contemporary features of Rembrandt. The apostle then is not solely a scriptural figure lost to time, but through Rembrandt's painting becomes a real life, flesh and blood person. Light and shadow illuminate his very human face as the wrinkles spread across his forehead, grey tufts of hair peak out, open pours visible on a rounded nose, and dark, inquisitive eyes looking back at us. We are drawn in.

In this time after Epiphany we have been hearing about the revealing of who Jesus is. Mark begins with Jesus' baptism by John in the river and leads us now to this mystical mountaintop experience where light and shadow are at play. Just as Jesus is transformed, changed, into dazzling white, just as suddenly a cloud overshadows Peter, James and John and

¹ See CBC's Ideas <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-rembrandt-changed-the-meaning-of-art-1.5899251>

they now hear that same voice present at Jesus' baptism - "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!"

The voice present at the beginning, the voice that moved out of the darkness and spoke light, the voice that breathed life into Adam's nostrils, the voice that claims Jesus, now rumbles out of the shadowy cloud. God's command comes as Peter, fearful and overfunctioning, suggests that they stay, at least for a while. But then just as suddenly, the whole thing is over. No longer the heavenly One surrounded by light, Jesus is once again the one who comes to be baptized by John in the river, indistinguishable from sinners and tax collectors, who eats, drinks, sleeps, and walks with them.

Transfiguration is so placed by Mark as a revealing of the kingdom of God as manifested in, with, and through Jesus. But both Mark and we know it is not the final revealing. We know that once down from the mountain the story and events move us forward to what awaits in Jerusalem. On the way, Mark's story will tell us something about ourselves as well: that the disciples will misunderstand who Jesus is, will betray, deny, and run in fear from a tomb which no longer contains Jesus. For our ordinary lives are very much lived out in the play between light and shadow, between glory and obscurity.

Transformation *is* a big word. But Mark tells the story for a purpose: when we see Jesus we see God's self-portrait. Using light and shadow, Mark draws us in to the hidden God who will no longer stay hidden, the God of mystery who meets us in our very real fear and our overfunctioning, the God who will not leave us that way, but who promises to meet us - in a word that changes us, in a meal that opens us, in another who is grace for us, in a truth that recalibrates our lives.

And whenever the light illuminates those spaces around us and within us, we become that hinge or bridge for others to see a world awash in God's glory, God's love and mercy.

Do you also see your own face there? Your own self-portrait? It is a likeness that is revealed in glory of the One who belongs to heaven. It is a likeness that is revealed in the One who is crucified - and risen.

Amen.

