

How to See
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Matthew 17:1-9 An excerpt from Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard

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Today is Transfiguration Sunday. When we remember the story of Jesus taking Peter, James, and John up the mountain, of Jesus glowing dazzling white between Moses and Elijah, of a voice from the cloud booming, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” It is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany and this story is the mother of all epiphanies. One of the most interesting things I find about the Transfiguration, is that it is not a transformation. In the eyes of Peter, James, and John, Jesus changed, he transformed into something else. But in reality, he was simply revealing his truest, most authentic self, and for the first time the disciples saw him for who he had always been. If you have ever known someone who has come out as gay or transgender, then you get it. They have not decided to be someone different. They have invited you to see them fully as they have always been, but perhaps had not yet felt comfortable enough to reveal. That is the Transfiguration: the subject – Jesus – is the same as he has always been. It is the disciples, it is us, who are changed by a deeper, fuller truth being revealed to us.

I feel like I could write a million sermons on the Transfiguration from so many different angles, so many different themes. The problem is too much choice, a great problem to have, really. So, this year I flipped through a variety of translations and biblical resources to discover what word or phrase the Spirit would catch me with. I kept searching until I read the Transfiguration story in my copy of the *Heliand*. Now, I first learned of the *Heliand*, which means “healer,” a couple years ago in a class I took on church history and the environment. It’s a 9th century Germanic retelling of the story of Jesus’ life that reflects the melding of the new Christian religion with the Saxons’ traditional worship of Woden and other gods. The *Heliand* was written as a series of epic poems, some parts with musical notations, and it was meant to be recited or sung in mead halls. Can you imagine traveling bards sharing Jesus’ story in the company of great warriors and chieftains at long tables with their drinking horns? Anyway, here are the parts, with their local embellishments, that the Spirit brought to my attention this year:

When He bent low in prayer,
Lo, there upon the mountain His whole appearance,
His garb became changed. His cheeks became light,
Shone like the bright, shimmering sun: so shone God’s Bairn.
Light was His body, and long rays shone
Radiant around the All-Weilder’s Bairn, His raiment so white
To the sight as is snow.

The Saxons were not content with his face simply shining like the sun and his clothes just dazzling white. They needed even more dramatic beauty and wonder in their telling. But it

was in the description of what the disciples saw as Jesus stood radiant with Elijah and Moses where the Spirit really danced for me:

So blithe it was, up there on the mountain. And the light shone bright,
And it was like unto that goodly garden, the meadow green,
Like unto Paradise itself.

Many Saxons in this story's original audience had actually been threatened and coerced into this new Christian religion. Their sacred groves and traditional open-air places of worship had been destroyed by the Holy Roman Empire. As Terry M. Wildman writes as he reflects on American colonizers' forced conversions of Native Americans, "Christianity has a really good message, but it's had some really bad messengers." Wildman would go on to spearhead the creation of The First Nations Version of the New Testament, which, like the *Heliand*, leaves behind the false Christianity that empire has used for its own purposes for centuries. Both of those texts come from cultures that had more connection to their respective natural environments, to the beauty and diversity of God's creation, than their colonizers or oppressors did. They could see that Jesus so loved the whole world even through the messengers of an empire in love, not truly with God, but with power over others. They could see Christ's radiant, true personhood and Godhood shattering the narrative of oppressive systems that had been covered in a thin veneer of Christian vocabulary and symbols. They could see the forest despite the trees. They could see the "goodly garden."

I wonder if we can too. When we see that God's name has been used in vain to peddle messages of hate for God's children and exploitation of God's creation, can we see that God has never been in that message? Can we be changed? I know I have been. And I wonder what other challenging epiphanies await me in the future. And what about where we hadn't thought to look for God before, can we learn to see that They have always been there in everyday places of beauty and harmony? Can we see what Annie Dillard calls the "unwrapped gifts and free surprises" that are strewn across our world? Can we see the world we live in now as "that goodly garden...Like Paradise itself," rather than simply something to get through before reaching Paradise in the next life? I think what Dillard writes is true: "What you see is what you get." I don't think it's ever too late to learn, or relearn, to see the world through the prism of the Transfiguration, the lesson of how to see what's right in front of us with new, inspired eyes. (And that's good news because we forget how to so often that we need to be reminded around this time every year.) Whether it be the story of Jesus from a different part of the world such as in the *Heliand*, the message of God through another culture such as in The First Nations Version of the New Testament, or the simple beauty of God's creation such as a cute little muskrat kit paddling from its den, God is constantly revealing Godself in new-to-us ways.

And it's not always easy. When God's voice boomed that this was indeed God's son, the Beloved, the disciples were terrified. Has a newly revealed truth ever shaken your world or unsettled you? A truth about yourself, about a loved one, about the world? Even if it was good, did you need time to acclimate or heal from the disruption? We know Jesus by many names: Teacher, Savior, King. But the writers of the *Heliand*, victims of a violent force that

sought to destroy their sacred places and erase their beloved traditions, related most meaningfully to Jesus as Healer. The Transfiguration story told in Matthew is the only one in the synoptic gospels where Jesus touched the terrified disciples and told them, “Do not be afraid.” And this is how that part is told in the *Heliand*:

Then [He] did go to them;
And with His hand He touched them, the Best of Healers,
High they should feel no dread: “No harm shall come to you here
From these blessed sights which ye have now seen,
These marvelous things.” Then the men’s spirits
In their hearts were healed, and healed were their minds;
In their breasts there was comfort.”

We’re heading into the season of Lent, which may not always be associated with comfort and healing. We are journeying through this wilderness season together, though that wilderness may look different for each of us. Facing a reflection that reveals unsettling truths, first steps on an uncharted path, a leap of faith away from something familiar that no longer serves us. But the comfort is knowing that we are journeying not just with each other, but with Jesus by our side. That he is, in fact, the Best of Healers, and that this journey of seeing the world more clearly in all its complexities is, in fact, a journey of healing. This Lenten season, may you see Jesus in the eyes of a neighbor from a culture wholly different from your own. May you see the world around you as the “goodly garden,” and know that you are part of God’s beloved creation. May you discover a world strewn with brilliantly dazzling pennies.