

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

7 August 2022 – TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Extreme Makeover*”*

Exodus 34:29-35 (Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai.)
Psalm 99 (The Lord is king; proclaim His greatness!)
2 Peter 1:13-21 (Peter witnesses the transfiguration; all prophecy is to be interpreted through the Spirit.)
St. Luke 9:28-36 (Jesus is transfigured on the mountain and identified as God’s Son.)

Today, we are observing the Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ. On a mountaintop long ago, in the presence of His closest disciples, Jesus’ clothing, His image, the body He showed to others—all were dramatically altered. As Jesus prayed, His entire appearance changed—from the image of a humble, ordinary man to a powerful revelation of God in His all His glory. Talk about an “*extreme makeover*”!

These days, transfigurations—whether of living spaces or people—are wildly popular on television. From “Dream Home Makeover” on Netflix, and CBS’s “Secret Celebrity Renovation,” to HGTV’s “Fix My Frankenhouse” and A&E’s “Heavy” (about extreme weight loss), viewers are fascinated by before-and-after transformations.

Back in 2002 when “Extreme Makeover” premiered, the individual not only got a new hairdo, makeup, and wardrobe, but underwent reconstructive surgery as well. Often, the results were stunning, and the person’s totally transformed appearance affected his or her entire outlook on life.

Yes, transfigurations are big business today. I would hazard a guess that most of us secretly want one. The most recent data released by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons show that in 2020, there were 6.8 *million* reconstructive cosmetic procedures in the U.S.¹ Transfigurations are big business because all of us are acutely aware of the image we present to the world. And if it will provide us an advantage, we are eager to alter our appearance. Sometimes we don’t simply modify our looks; we change the entire way in which we present ourselves to the world—including our name.

Maurice Micklewhite didn’t sound like a handsome, elegant leading man, so the actor changed his name to Michael Caine. Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko transformed herself into Natalie Wood, and Alphonso d’Abruzzo became Alan Alda. Would you have paid money to see Marion Morrison shoot it out in Western movies? Possibly, but Marion didn’t take a chance—he transfigured *himself* into John Wayne.

In the Bible, several people also acquired new names to go with a new life and a new image. After God made a covenant with Abram, he became Abraham. And his wife Sarai became Sarah. In order to fulfill God’s promise, their son Jacob became Israel, the father of the Jewish nation. Saul the Pharisee became Paul, the early Church’s greatest evangelist. And Simon the fisherman became Peter, “The Rock” on which Christ built His church.

When God is at work in people’s lives, transfigurations are not the exception; they are the rule. Take, for example the story of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:20-34: Here was a Roman official charged with holding Paul and Silas prisoners. Yet the apostles’ faith was so strong, they sat in their cell singing hymns and praying. In response, God freed the prisoners by means of an earthquake. The terrified jailer asked how he could be saved. After Paul and Silas shared with him the good news of Jesus, the jailer believed, was baptized, and took the men to his own home, where he fed them, and compassionately tended to the wounds they had received from the Roman beatings.

When I reread that passage, I felt myself getting choked up, I was so moved at the amazing, unbelievably powerful ways the living Christ is able to change people for the better, when we encounter and believe in Him. When we do that, we approach the world—with both its joys and sorrows—differently. When we know Christ and become filled with His Holy Spirit, we begin to walk in God’s ways, and our appearance does become altered.

There is a kindness, a gentleness, and a brightness about us that is not there unless we have God’s presence within us. I’m sure you can think of at least one person you know whose face fairly glows with the light of Christ, they are so filled with the love of Jesus.

Unlike on “Extreme Makeover,” Jesus’ transfiguration on either Mt. Tabor or Mt. Hermon—scholars are divided about which one—was not a triumph of cosmetology. He did not have it done to Himself. Jesus’ changed appearance was far more than superficial. It was a glorious revelation from On High to demonstrate that Jesus truly is God in person. And that affirmation of Christ’s divinity would continue to change lives for more than the next two millennia.

I find it interesting that, of all the Gospel writers, only Saint Luke records that Jesus was *praying* when the Transfiguration happened.¹ In St. Luke’s account, Jesus prayed, yet His disciples slept. With their heads in the clouds, they had drifted off into a semi-conscious state.

When I first moved to upstate New York, I heard the story of Rip Van Winkle. Washington Irving wrote about a man who fell asleep one day in a quiet spot on the banks of the Hudson River and didn’t wake up for 20 years. When he went to sleep, the sign above his favorite tavern read: “George III, King of England.” Rip was a subject of the British crown. When he woke up, King George was replaced by George Washington, and Rip was an American citizen. The tragic part was that he slept through a revolution that changed the world. Rip snored on, unaware of the earth-shaking events that were taking place around him.

That’s sort of like what happened to Peter, James, and John. They were oblivious to the amazing display of God’s power that was taking place. But we shouldn’t be too critical of Jesus’ disciples. There are times when, we, too, have our heads in the clouds. We are cocooned in our own little worlds, sleeping through the great things God is doing around us.² In fact, God is all about transformation! It’s been said that God loves us just the way we are when He finds us—but loves us enough not to leave us that way.

Let’s look at how the Lord transformed His disciples. Before Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion, their one roaring success was Judas, and their one groveling failure was Peter. Judas was thriving in ways that most impress the world: financially and politically. Cleverly, he arranged to control the group’s money and skillfully manipulated the Jewish authorities.

Whereas Peter was a failure in ways that we dread: he was impotent in a crisis and socially inept. At Jesus’ arrest, he collapsed, a hapless blustering coward. In two of the most pivotal situations of his life with Jesus—his confession of Christ as the Messiah on the road to Caesarea Philippi, and his vision of Jesus as the Son of God on the Mount of Transfiguration—Peter blurted out only embarrassingly inappropriate things. He wasn’t the companion we would want with us in times of danger, or would be comfortable with at a social occasion.

However, by the time Peter wrote today’s Epistle, he was testifying as to what a powerful effect Christ’s transfiguration had on his faith. Peter assured his readers that his message was true because at the Transfiguration he realized Christ’s authority came directly from God. And now time has reversed our judgments on these two men. Judas has become a byword for betrayal, while Peter is a saint.³ Along with them, we, too, will be judged by what kind of relationship we have with Jesus.

Like Peter, James, and John on Mount of Transfiguration, will we nap through the many ways and occasions that God wants to reveal to us Christ's authority and power? Will we muddle along, drowsy and confused, spiritually out of it? Or will we risk getting an extreme makeover, allowing ourselves to be totally transformed by the light, love, and radical forgiveness of Jesus?

Remember, He was transfigured while communing with God in prayer. When we, like Christ, abide in God's presence, we, too, will be transformed. Instead of feeling anxious and discouraged, we will receive strong comfort, fresh hope, and unshakeable peace. Thanks be to God that He's in the business of extreme makeovers!

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we thank and praise You for revealing to us on the Mount of Transfiguration that Jesus is indeed Your Son, whom we are called to follow. Like those disciples long ago, we are eager to experience Your presence and Your glory. But unlike them, let us not fall asleep or keep silent, failing to tell others about what You have done for us. Thank you for transforming our lives through saving our souls. Now, Lord, we ask that You continue to make us over more and more each day into the image and character of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This we ask in His Holy Name. *Amen.*

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 2004, Wesley Grove United Methodist Church, Gaithersburg MD, 2004; 9 August 2009, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY; 6 August 2017, St. John's Episcopal Church, Compass PA. Used with permission.

¹ American Society of Plastic Surgeons, "2020 Plastic Surgery Statistics," [PlasticSurgery.org](https://www.plasticsurgery.org/documents/News/Statistics/2020/plastic-surgery-statistics-full-report-2020.pdf) <<https://www.plasticsurgery.org/documents/News/Statistics/2020/plastic-surgery-statistics-full-report-2020.pdf>> 3 August 2022.

² Adapt. John A. Stroman, *God's Downward Mobility*. (Lima, OH: CSS, 1996).

³ Adapt. Eugene Petersen, qtd. Tim Kimmel, *Little House on the Free way*, pp. 191-192. Via <illustrations@CLERGY.NET> 17 February 2004.