

# **‘Transfiguration: Mission into the Disarray of the World’**

## **A Sermon for World Mission Sunday**

**Feb. 11, 2024**

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In The Episcopal Church, the last Sunday in Epiphany is designated as World Mission Sunday—a time for the church to reflect on its presence and mission in the world. It is my honor to share this reflection with my siblings in The Episcopal Church on World Mission Sunday 2024.

Mission, as we all know, is very dear to Anglicanism. It is an integral part of our worship and identity. Mission signifies our commitment toward God’s messianic project for the entire creation. It incorporates proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom; teaching, baptizing, and making disciples; responding to human needs; transforming unjust structures; and striving to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation.

I serve the communities of Ramallah and Birzeit, two Palestinian cities north of Jerusalem. For the last four months, a vicious war has devastated our beloved country and disrupted the entire region, turning it into a place of strife, pain, despair, and death. Tens of thousands have been killed and injured—70% of them women and children. Two million have been displaced. Entire neighborhoods have been leveled to the ground. Entire families have been wiped from the civil registry. Gaza has been described by UN officials as “a graveyard for children,” and “a living hell for everyone else.” Daily incursions into Palestinian villages and cities have devastated the community. More than half a million have lost their jobs because of the war. These challenging times have left the community overwhelmed physically, psychologically, and spiritually. What has been even more distressing to the Palestinian Christian community is the utter silence, even indifference, of the majority in the international church.

Such times of grave suffering were not uncommon during Jesus’ time. Jesus and his community lived under Roman colonial domination, a vicious military and economic power that devastated Jesus’ community.

The Gospel reading from Mark 9:2-9 narrates the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. The well-known and cherished story is also recorded in Matthew 17:1-13, Luke 9:28-36, and is alluded to in 2 Peter 1:16-18. I wish to read the story through the Palestinian context of pain, trauma, despair, and abandonment. Jesus took three of his disciples (Peter, James, and John) and led them up a high mountain. There, he was transfigured before them. On the mountaintop, Moses and Elijah appeared to them and began speaking to Jesus. Captivated by the scene, Peter proposed building three tabernacles: one each for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. But a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved son; listen to him.”

Mark concludes the story telling us that the disciples “no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus alone.”

Luke, on the other hand, adds an important piece of information to his account: The conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah concerned his “exodus,” his departure from the Earth, which was about to be

accomplished at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). Exodus is an important biblical term. It signifies liberation from oppressive forces that seek to dehumanize and demonize God's community. Jesus' identification as the chosen Son of God intersects with his missional exodus: a mission of liberation and freedom.

To understand the meaning of the transfiguration, it is imperative to read the story in its literary context. In the preceding chapter, we read about the disciples' failure to provide for the hungry crowd. "How can one feed these men with bread here in the desert?" the disciples respond to Jesus' concern for the hungry crowd following him (Luke 8:4). The disciples then became confused when Jesus warned them about the "yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod," thinking Jesus wanted them to bring bread (Luke 8:15-16). Jesus scolded them, "Do you still not see or understand? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?" (Luke 8:17-18).

The inability of the disciples to recognize Jesus' identity and mission is established further by the unfinished healing of the blind man who saw people as trees walking around (Luke 8:24). Then follows Jesus' questions to the disciples: "Who do people say I am?" and "Who do you say I am?" Peter's answer, "You are the Messiah," was made even more perplexing after Jesus informs his disciples about his mission of suffering, rejection, and death. Jesus then says there exists a gap between human concerns and God's concerns. Mark concludes his pre-transfiguration groundwork by including Jesus' teachings on discipleship: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it..." (Luke 8:35-38).

The transfiguration event comes next and aims at charging the disciples, and us, to acknowledge Jesus as God's beloved/chosen Son and to therefore "listen to him." The questions: "Who is this?" and "Who do you say I am?" have been answered by the divine voice: "This is my beloved/chosen Son." The heavenly voice demands that Jesus' disciples and the church listen to *him*.

As we celebrate World Mission Sunday, the transfiguration event leaves us with some essential questions: Who is Jesus for us today? What is his mission? Who are we as his disciples? What is our mission?

The transfiguration story leaves us with burning questions: Is Jesus' voice the one we adhere to in the midst of the shrieks of the world around us? Do we follow His example of mission?

Identity and mission are interconnected. Jesus' transfiguration is in fact an invitation toward our own metamorphosis. Listening to Jesus and following his example of mission entails taking risks for the liberation of God's community and God's creation. When we listen to and follow Jesus' example, we are transformed into active agents in God's mission. The transfiguration calls the church into noisy, messy, risky, and gloomy contexts to witness to God's redeeming and liberating love in Jesus Christ.

On the mountaintop, however, Peter made a mistake. He suggested they set up shelters (tabernacles) and stick around a while, and so let the fun begin. The transfiguration does indeed point to Jesus' eschatological glory, as Peter hoped, but between here and there stands the cross. Like Peter, the question remains: What kinds of tents, shelters, comfort zones, and tabernacles do we construct that prevent us

from carrying our cross and following Jesus? On the mountaintop, Jesus prepared his disciples for the kind of mission they needed to undertake. Against Peter's wishes to build three tents, Jesus directs the disciples toward a journey that includes rejection and agony. Unlike our human wish to build sanctuaries of glory and tents of excuses, God calls us to go into the dark corners of pain and suffering and to preach God's liberating love and mercy.

Many early Christian writers argued that those united with Christ would be transfigured as he was. Yet, the concrete reality of this historical moment requires the church not to seek glory nor to avoid criticism and suffering. St. Augustine, reflecting on the transfiguration story, writes: "Come down, Peter. You were eager to go on resting on the mountain; come down, preach the word ... Go down to labor on earth, to serve on earth, to be despised, crucified on earth. Life came down, to be killed; bread came down, to go hungry; the way came down, to grow weary on a journey; the fountain came down, to experience thirst; and are you refusing to endure toil?"

As the Holy Land goes through what seems like an endless night, the church is called to engage, not retreat. To help transform pain into hope and oppression into liberation. Rather than constructing shelters of excuses, of safety, of tranquility, and of glory, the church is called to step into the sometimes dark valleys of our neighborhoods, nations, and the world. The church's identity is entangled with her mission to be an agent of liberation and freedom in contexts of oppressive powers and subjugation.

Such a transfiguration mission requires that the church overcome neutrality, fear, self-centeredness, and carelessness. It entails engaging the messiest conditions and conflicts; it involves getting our hands dirty. It encompasses an indispensable action to dismantle systems of injustice and oppression. It believes that there is no sphere into which the church may not speak or cannot engage. It entails a prophetic denunciation of everything that seeks to undo God's dream for God's world. And yes, it anticipates criticism, repudiation, pain, and death for the sake of God's mission.

Jesus' departure/exodus means that our mission is also one of departure: from the self-centeredness, personal and communal interest, indifference, and fear that hinder God's mission to proclaim liberation to all the oppressed, the outcast, and the disenfranchised. Yes, exodus entails taking risks, leaving comfort zones, and crossing borders into the unknown to join in God's mission and to meet God as He leads the mission. The belief that Jesus was transfigured means that our lives, our contexts, our nations, and all creation can be transfigured. By the power of the Holy Spirit and through the agency of the church, the metamorphosis of pain, suffering, and death is possible.

Amen.

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