

Red-Letter Days

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March 6, 2011. Jesus was transformed at his Transfiguration and he headed in a new direction. It was an important day, a red-letter day, in his life. For all of us, there are those days when we live out the gospel as we know it, and we are changed people by it. Pastor Keith preaches on these important days in our lives that cause us to head out in new directions.

*** Transcript ***

We reflect more on this Transfiguration story as we begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, assuming if we were all journal keepers and wrote down the highlights of each day of our life, and kept a page for each day or a paragraph, at the end of the year we should be able to go back and maybe put a special mark around the days that were significant for us, days that stood out as being particularly important. Maybe we'd have a "top ten" days of the last year. And then if we'd put a journal for each year of our life, we'd put those all together and collect all those top ten days out of all those years together, we could find out which were the most important days of our life. Maybe out of those hundred days or whatever we'd have for our lives collected through the years, maybe we'd pick the top ten out of all those days. We could narrow it down to the important days of our lives. Most of us could probably pick out five to ten days that were very significant for us, even without having kept journals. We could go sift through in our minds and think about those things that have been particularly important to us, times that maybe meant a change in direction for how we lived. Maybe life wasn't quite the same for us after we lived through those particular days. Maybe it was a particular prize we won or accomplishment we achieved. Maybe it was the start of a new relationship, or the end of a relationship that was very important to us. Maybe we made a new discovery on a certain day. Or maybe we took a new position. Maybe we saw someone else do something that inspired us and said, I want to be like that. And we took off in a new direction.

And if we wanted to mark those days, we might put a special color on them, kind of highlight them, take a yellow highlighter and mark those days if we could imagine a journal, whether or not we have one. We might put special marks on a calendar saying these were days significant in my life. We would somehow set them apart so that not only we, but other people would be able to see in some way that these were life-changing days for me, special days. In icon art, as we've been talking with the children often, kind of a halo of a special color is put over the people we want to identify in an icon, is who the central figures are. Now our eye is drawn to that main person. The story represented by the picture revolves around that person. Today we see Jesus with the special mark on the bulletin cover, and then Moses and Elijah with him. It gives us an idea of the purpose of the picture. And if we're meditating on it, as we are to do with an icon, it helps us focus on the meaning of one certain person.

Well, as a way to describe what's happening in today's gospel, we could maybe think of it as a snapshot or an icon of the life of Jesus. And the nimbus is above him. The special nimbus is above him to say this is the important person in this picture. He is the central one and it is an important day for him. It gives meaning to his ministry that he has this day of Transfiguration, and to have been there must have shaped the belief of Peter, James, and John. In this case it's not just an artist's rendering that gives a special nimbus or mark to Jesus, because it shows forth a day when we could say all of heaven on earth — God gives a special mark to Jesus. His face shone brightly on its own, not just by some artist's

brush, but the face of Jesus shone so brightly people could not look at it. It was the glory of God dwelling on and in Jesus. He was glowing in divine radiance. Moses and Elijah were there with him, as these figures of the past were highlighted too. And then there was the very voice of God, the voice of God saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

This must have been so memorable for Peter and James and John to have been there. It must have sustained them later on when they were challenged in following him. They would go into very harsh times. They would be persecuted for his sake. And they must have been taunted with phrases that said, oh Jesus was just a man who died, why are you paying any attention to him? What was so important about that guy? They knew he wasn't just a man. He was the Son of God. Regular people don't change their appearance. They don't appear with Moses and Elijah. And they don't hear proclamations of God come from the sky. Peter, James, and John could remember that they had witnessed this special moment, and it would be with them as a marked time, a special day, a highlighted day when they were being persecuted for the sake of the Lord.

We don't want to forget the impact it must have had on Jesus himself, as well. As soon as this event is over and they head down the hill, Jesus announces that he must suffer and die. When God's voice comes and he hears too, along with the others, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him," he is telling him, as well as the others around him, that this suffering, this dying, this rising is all-important. It's all part of the plan. And Jesus, we know, it was a hard time for him. This must have been affirming to him, to hear that indeed he must go through with this. Indeed it was God's will that he go through with this plan. As amazing as it was, they all needed to hear it: Jesus, Peter, James, and John. It was the plan of God.

Well, these four will have other red-letter days coming in their near future. There will be such things as the parade into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. There will be the Last Supper. There will be the trials before the priests and before Pilate. There will be the crucifixion. And there will be the resurrection. Each one of these days would qualify as a nimbus day, a red-letter day, a specially-marked day with special status given for meditation. Each of those days deserves its own meditation and its way into the mind of God, its way into the mind of Jesus. Certainly the death and the resurrection of Jesus would receive the most attention. And that would get the highest, the biggest nimbus of all, the biggest mark saying: focus on this above all others. But when a series of events all leads up to that great moment, each one of those events is important — just as in our lives we can look back and say this event led to that event that led to that event that led to where I got to today. So starting with the Transfiguration then, these other events all build up as special days in themselves, but they all are most important because they lead up to the death and the resurrection of our Lord.

So the fact that this day happened, this Transfiguration of the Lord, helped the disciples put the death and resurrection of Jesus in perspective. It helped them to see that indeed he was God's Son, suffering for the sake of the world. It helped them to see that he wasn't just the consummation of the law and the prophets and Moses and Elijah, but he was a whole step above Moses and Elijah. He was above them and brought a whole new way of relating to God — not just through the word of the prophets, not just through the word of the law. Jesus was above this and gives us a whole new way of being in relationship with God. It helped them to see that Jesus had God's vocal stamp of approval on what would unfold in his life, and led them to see that this was all part of the plan.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, it took the young church quite a while to figure out what the life of Jesus really meant. How were they to interpret this? Some have been some places, some have been other places. Some had seen some healing. Some had heard this. Some had been at the

resurrection or seen the resurrected Lord. Some hadn't. They knew about a crucifixion. They knew about all these different things. But how do they all fit together? What did they all mean? This was important for them, to tell the story of Jesus. It highlighted who he was and how he fit in with the prophets who had gone before him, how God approved what happened to him. And it reminded him that they were not to stand in the glory forever. They were to mark it for its meaning and importance, and then move on, to go down the mountain, to live the Christian life.

Another icon picture of Jesus would likely be of his baptism. No doubt there would be a nimbus above him, and maybe one on John the Baptist too, to show who were the important characters in that icon. That's where the ministry of Jesus would begin, which would lead him to the point of the Transfiguration. And from the Transfiguration he would go on, seeing his last days ahead of him — as we in this time of the church year are saying: now we begin that journey through Lent, to the crucifixion and resurrection. The Transfiguration marked for Jesus that time when he was then setting his face toward Jerusalem, knowing what had to happen.

I would hope that for each one of us who is baptized, that we would be able to mark that baptism day as a special day for us, the day when we began a journey with Jesus. Most of us don't remember that day, but we can know the date and we can say that was an important day in my life, when God marked me and said I am his child. If there is a baptism picture of us on that day, we might want to pencil in, or imagine penciled in, a little halo over us saying that was the day God said to me, "You are a child of mine." It would show us receiving the blessing of life of God as we were there wet, forgiven, and ready to start a new life lived in God. That day would be a beginning day though, a day folded into other days, marked in church life — important dates for us in our lives, saying there were other important days after baptism that marked my life in God. One of those would be like our confirmation day, or other days where we took a new step, saying I understand the faith in a new way today, and this is a mark day of my Christian faith life.

For all of us, there are those days when we live out the gospel as we know it, and we are changed people by it. Or we witness maybe someone else serving in the name of Christ, and it moves us to be like them. That's what saints are so useful for: to hear their stories and how they lived out their lives, and we hear of them and say that's an example I might want to follow. But we have contemporary saints, people around us who show us the faith. And when we admire what they do it says I want to be like that person. And there are those days when someone admires us, someone comes up to us and thanks us for what we've done, and it spurs us on to think well maybe something I'm doing is right. There are those times when someone else so in need grabs our attention that we cannot but help them. And there are those days we mark in red when we do that, when we say I'm stepping out of myself, my normal patterns here, to say that person needs my help, I'm going to help them. I'm stepping out because God has shone on me, chosen me, and said you're the person to help that person today. There are days when the nimbus is on us.

We are thankful to be servants of Christ who are also saints of Christ. By what Jesus has done for us, we are made righteous before God. We have faith which is active in love. We go down the mountain and we get involved where life is happening. We bring the healing goodness of Jesus to the world. Jesus was transformed at his Transfiguration and he headed a new direction. We are transformed by him, and we head in new directions. Instead of serving the self, we serve others. Instead of wanting to be the ones who have the nimbus on us, we focus on the work of other people around us and on the serving to be done. And we may receive recognition, but that's not why we do it. We do it because we're doing it for someone else. We do this all better when we keep our eyes on Jesus as we would on an icon, and we live with him and follow him down the mountain to the people who are in need. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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