

1-1-2011

The Transfiguration: A Light that Lasts

Laura Buffington
laura.buffington@southbrook.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buffington, Laura (2011) "The Transfiguration: A Light that Lasts," *Leaven*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol19/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Transfiguration: A Light that Lasts

LAURA BUFFINGTON

It happens to me at the beginning of almost every movie. The previews are done, my popcorn is almost finished and the movie is finally starting. And I feel it. I sit up straighter and I hold on a little tighter to the armrest. It's not quite panic but it's close. It is a sort of fear. I worry that I will be the person in the theater who will not get it. I wonder if there will be some plot twist, some narrative device that won't make any sense to me. I don't want to become the person in the theater leaning over and asking: "Who's that guy?" "Did we know he was a bad guy?" "Why are they suddenly back in 1955?" It is the fear that helps me pay attention. I start writing myself mental post-its to remember the characters' names and their backgrounds. I filter through the information given to decide what stuff matters and what is just for kicks. Sometimes I am on such high alert that when the characters are asked to remember something, I try to remember it too. I memorize their phone numbers and the details of their mission. I am trying desperately not to get left out of the story. It seems to be happening more often with television shows too. They are telling more complicated stories these days—you cannot afford to miss a single episode if you want in on the whole story. It seems that a part of their mission is to confuse us.

It definitely happens at the beginning of books. The fear starts right away. I try to pay attention to every detail. I fight the temptation to skim past sections because it is just so easy to miss some clue, some carefully chosen word that is the key to the whole story. Last year, I read *Anna Karenin* and I had to come up with all kinds of tricks just to remember all the Russian names and their relations. And of course, keeping the names straight is only the beginning of the perseverance that a great story demands of us.

A great story requires work from its watchers, readers, listeners. It requires interaction, questions, conversations. A great story should cause some fear. A great story demands our full attention. We don't want to get left behind in a great story. We want to hang on and enjoy the whole ride.

We ought to enter the story of Jesus with the same anticipation, the same high level of alert. We cannot just wander into the Gospels like we would a formulaic film where you can see the ending before it even starts. We have to have just the right amount of fear. If we have too much fear, we will be paralyzed by our own insecurities. Many of us come to scripture deciding ahead of time that we're not going to get it, so we barely read it. We rely on hearsay and we hope that the story will still sink in. If we have too little fear, we may end up blinded by our pride and self-assurance. Some of us approach scripture believing that we already know what it says and we end up telling the wrong story.

But if we come with just the right amount of fear, enough to pay attention, we may end up feeling and seeing things we never knew were there. We may find ourselves so absorbed in the story that it becomes our own.

I imagine the disciples knew this kind of fear. I imagine they had come to know what it meant to stay alert, to take note, to hold on tight. They probably knew that whatever it was Jesus was up to, it was going to be a great story someday. And maybe that alone was why they kept following even when they were seeing things that didn't quite make sense.

In Mark 9, we find the kind of story that makes even the most casual listener, watcher, reader sit up and take notice. Of course, by this point in the Gospel of Mark, there's already been far more intrigue, mystery, action and drama than could ever be found in any Hollywood production or great American novel. There's already been miracles performed, missions accomplished and even murder. Without the help of a special effects crew, Jesus has even walked on water and fed thousands of people with a few fish and loaves of bread.

If you are trying to follow this story, you may have already decided that this is the kind of story you will not understand until it ends. As if there's some secret, some twist, something going on in this story that is not like any story you've heard before.

Mark 9.2–8 tells us a great story. A crazy story. A story that runs the risk of confusing people. A story that requires some fear. Jesus takes three of his disciples aside: Peter, James and John. Presumably, he doesn't really tell them very much about what they are about to see. Maybe he didn't even say anything. Maybe he just gave them a nod that meant they were supposed to slip away and follow him away from the crowd. Maybe when they figured out that it was only the three of them, they felt the panic. Something was about to happen and they were going to be in on it.

Mark 9.2 says Jesus directed them up a mountain and then it simply says, "He was transfigured before them." He started to look different. So different that it defied description. Mark says in verse 3: "His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." Even something as simple as describing the colors goes beyond any earthly reference. "White" is as close as Mark can get, but as a storyteller, he wants us to know that white doesn't even begin to describe it.

Then a couple of dead people show up! Suddenly, the indescribable, transfigured Jesus is talking to Elijah and Moses, who have both been gone physically for generations but who still hold a very prominent place in Jewish history and storytelling. We don't know what they talked about. Maybe because Peter, James and John, even though they saw it happen, only got part of the story. Maybe they only caught fragments of this magical, mysterious conversation. Maybe their best guesses about what was said don't even come close. Like us, they are seeing it from some distance and they can't quite get it.

Peter, who has a knack for "not quite getting it," tries to make this supernatural, fantastical situation feel a little more normal. He wants to set up some tents, make camp, build a fire, roast marshmallows. Or maybe he wants to set up shrines, or temples, something to mark the place where this is happening. Maybe he does want to stay forever. He knows that something good is happening but Mark lets us in on Peter's real emotions: "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

Apparently, Peter's question does not really warrant a direct answer. As Peter stands there, exposed for who he really is as well, we hear a voice that speaks from the clouds. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" They should at least remember this voice. If they had been paying attention, they would have heard a voice from above say something very similar at the baptism of Jesus, also naming Jesus as the "Son" and "the Beloved" (Mark 1.11).

And then in a flash, everything is back to some kind of normal. Elijah and Moses are gone and Jesus is no longer a shining, dazzling, alternative version of himself. And they head back down the mountain and have a confusing conversation about Elijah.

That's the story. And unlike other stories in the Gospels, where Jesus says something or does something unusual, he never explains this one. He never tells them what it means that they saw him in this other light up on the mountain. He never tells them what he and Moses and Elijah talked about. He never tells them why he chose to bring them instead of everybody else. In fact, Jesus even tells them not to talk about this moment with anybody else.

No matter how closely we pay attention to this story, it will still be a mystery.

We can try to understand parts of the story. Certainly, many people think this story helps us to understand that Jesus was both human and divine. This story can lend evidence to the idea that the true

nature of Jesus as a part of the divine trinity, as something other than human, is still present even as Jesus walks around on earth. To see Jesus as just a person is only to see a part of the story. To see Jesus as God in a regular-guy disguise is only to see a part of the story. What the disciples saw was something heavenly, otherworldly, maybe the whole story. Maybe what they saw was Jesus in all of his glory.

Maybe this story challenges us as the readers, listeners, watchers, to ask ourselves if we are seeing Christ clearly. We may not be on the side of the mountain as eyewitnesses, but we have all formed some picture of who Jesus is, not just as an historical figure, but as the Christ. When we picture Jesus, do we see power? Do we see his true mission? Do we see the divine along with the human? Do we see the clarity along with the mystery? Do we see all the creativity, the genius, the compassion, the courage, the humility of Christ? And in the end, do we see that our words are only the beginning of our understanding?

Maybe Moses and Elijah were there because this moment had something to do with the resurrection to come. The resurrection that Jesus had alluded to only days before. This moment comes after a teaching from Jesus about how he was eventually going to suffer, be killed and come back to life. Maybe the presence of Moses and Elijah confirmed that there is in fact, some life after this life. Some life that is not that far away from this one.

Maybe the fact that a voice came out of the clouds, just like a voice spoke at the baptism, marks the importance of the things that are about to happen, the inauguration of the next phase of the mission. It's another signpost in the life of Jesus. Something big is about to happen and heaven is watching.

At the very least, this moment is a message to Peter, James and John, and to each one of us, that there is more to the story than what we can see, feel, smell, taste or touch. It is a glimpse into the extraordinary. And maybe it is meant to be only a glimpse.

After all, this is one of many stories in scripture and in the Gospels that can only really be read and accepted in faith. We don't have any rational scientific explanation for why a person might suddenly become dazzling white and hold conversations with people who are gone. While many of Jesus' teachings can be accepted and appreciated without believing that he is something other than human, this story requires some amount of faith.

This story challenges us to consider, maybe even confess, that no matter how much energy and effort we put into understanding the Gospels, into scholastic work on the Bible and theology, in the end, we are choosing to believe something that is beyond reason, beyond our senses. It is a step of faith.

The first step of faith is to mentally, emotionally and spiritually concede that at some point in this world, there was nothing. And then there was something. And really, if we believe that, anything should seem possible.

We attribute this initial "something" to an invisible, eternal, immortal God who always was and always will be. A God who made this world, made us and is, in some measure, still involved around here. The story gets crazier—this God took a trip here once from someplace we have never seen and can't mapquest. This God, or some manifestation of this God, was called Jesus and walked around doing things no one had ever seen and saying things no one had ever said. This Jesus was eventually killed in a way that was unjust and horrific and painful. And then this Jesus defied the one thing we fear most deep down in our souls, walking out of a stone tomb with a giant rock in front of it.

And we believe all of this had something to do with us. And on our best days, we believe all of this had something to do with the whole world. This initial faith in the invisible, this trust that something can be made from nothing, leads us to believe that our hearts can be different when we feel lost or broken. It lets us believe that this world can be different. This can be hard to do in a world where the bombs keep getting smarter, the poor seem to get poorer and cemeteries just get fuller.

But there are glimpses. If we quiet ourselves for a moment, if we slow down long enough, we might remember some flash, some sense, some notion that felt more true than any other moment. It could have been a moment when we were driving down the road to just the right song at just the right time. It could

have been when we saw our child for the first time. It could have been some moment around a campfire with people singing cliché songs about Jesus. It could have been beside the bed of a person you were losing. It could have been that one prayer, on that one day, when you don't know how you knew, but you knew your cry was heard. Maybe if we tried to describe it, we couldn't even really get the color right. But it was enough. It may not have been a bright, dazzling, unearthly white. It may have been more like the faint glow of a small candle in a very dark room. But however much light we have, we cover it, we protect it from the wind, we hold on to it. Or it holds on to us.

Moses once believed that God could make a dry path out of a deep sea. Elijah once believed that God could rain down fire from the sky. And because of that faith, they were spotted hundreds of years later, talking with Jesus on the side of a mountain. This is a crazy story. But if it's true, if it's possible, then it's possible that God hears your prayers. It's possible that people who are sick or broken can be healed. It's possible that darkness can become light. It's possible that we can be freed from the sins and addictions that keep us tangled up. It's possible that the world can become a brighter, transfigured place.

When I was a teenager, I went on my first mission trip to Kingston, Jamaica. One night, as the sun was setting, our missionary host took us up a mountain to show us a different kind of view. Normally, if you are going to see a mountain view, you would go while there was still daylight, but the night cover gave us just the right picture. From the mountain, we could see that different sections of the city had varying degrees of light. The poorest section, with the highest crime rate to match, was in total darkness. There were no street lamps. No blue television lights coming through windows. Just miles of pure darkness. There were bright spots too, but they were few and far between. Being able to see the view from above was completely different from the view as we walked along the streets. The clearly defined "light" and "dark" areas made the problem of poverty look different. Sometimes, from high places, just enough light is just the right amount. To help us see clearly. To help us see creatively. To help us see bravely.

There are parts to this Transfiguration story that do not make sense. There are parts to this story that are mysterious. This story requires something of us and that is what makes it great. This story requires trust. This story is a mere glimpse and sometimes we have to live off of glimpses. When the disciples were first called, Jesus simply said "Follow me." And with just the right amount of fear, they jumped into the story. And Jesus led them through deserts, up mountains, across rivers, into cities, toward crosses. Our call is the same. To follow Jesus. To jump into the story. It is about more than how we watch, read or listen to the story. It is about how we live the story. We are called to try to make our lives look more like his life. To go wherever we are led. Maybe even toward loss. We will probably see things we do not quite understand. We will probably wonder along the way. We will probably stumble along the way. And then someday, maybe even without words, the God of the universe will look in our direction, sneak us away from the crowd, pull back the curtains and show us a truth that defies description.

Laura Buffington is creative director and a teaching pastor at SouthBrook Christian Church in Miamisburg, Ohio.

