

# What was I thinking?

February 14, 2021



## Transfiguration – what happened?

This coming Sunday marks the end of the Christmas cycle in the liturgical year. I teach the liturgical seasons and special days as part of chorister training program and over time, I've learned a simpler way to look at it all. We can consider the whole church year in two basic cycles: a Christmas cycle, and an Easter cycle. Each has a time or preparation, the "big event" itself (marked with a day and a season), and something significant to follow it up. So, we had Advent to prepare, we had the big celebration of Christmas (and the twelve days of Christmas), then we had Epiphany, celebrating Christ coming to live among us. We also might celebrate the end of this festive time by observing Mardi Gras/Fat Tuesday/Shrove Tuesday, a last "blow-out" enjoying meat, butter, fat, and all the good things we might give up for Lent. Then we'll begin the Easter cycle (Lent/Easter/Pentecost). I don't want to go that far just yet.

But what's this Transfiguration about? I haven't seen any Transfiguration cards in the grocery store. What is it? What happened? We're not alone in being puzzled. The disciples that were there didn't seem to understand it any better. Peter, James, and John went up on a mountain with Jesus to pray. Something happened, Jesus changed, his faced changed, his clothes became white, Moses and Elijah appeared with him. Then a cloud came over them and a voice said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Then everything went back to normal. I seem to remember a similar (but fictional) scene in *The Lion King*, after which Rafiki the baboon says, "what was that?" In Luke we read that the disciples were weighed down with sleep. After it was over, at least for a while, they kept silent and told no one what happened. Why? Later, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be "betrayed into human hands." The disciples didn't

understand but they were afraid to ask questions. Were they tired and sleepy during the Transfiguration, maybe hallucinating? Or maybe they just thought so. Confused? Afraid to ask questions? I also remember a (fictional!) scene in the Harry Potter books, and probably a movie too, where strange things are happening and Harry Potter asks the wizard Dumbledore, “Is this real, or is it all in my head?” Dumbledore replies, “Of course it’s all in your head! But why would that mean it’s not real?”

I think we can honestly say we are living in confusing times right now. Why is all of this happening? Who can we believe and trust? When and how will it end? Is God causing all this? Is God helping us? In the midst of our swirling clouds and our weariness, we’re confused. We don’t understand. We have a lot of questions.

So, I guess we can see why Transfiguration doesn’t make for a good Hallmark holiday. As Presbyterians, if we look back on our history, we see that the early Calvinists rejected anything liturgical, either because it was seen as idolatry, or maybe just because they hated anything Catholic. There were times when they didn’t celebrate Christmas because it was “too Catholic.” But Calvin didn’t ignore Transfiguration. He couldn’t say whether Moses and Elijah really appeared, or in Calvin’s words, “whether only their spectres were set before the disciples, just as prophets saw visions of absent things. Although there is much to be said on both sides, as they say, it seems more likely to me that they really were brought to that place.”

One of the hymns we’ll sing tomorrow, *Jesus, Take Us to the Mountain*, asks the questions: “What do you want us to see there, that your close companions saw?” and “What do you want us to hear there, that your dear disciples heard?”

Another hymn we’ll sing (you are singing along at home, right?) is *Fairest Lord Jesus*: “Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer, than all the angels heaven can boast.” Our new socially-distanced handbell ensemble has just the thing, and they will play it for the prelude:

Licensed to First Presbyterian Church - Athens, GA

# Beautiful Savior

CRUSADER'S HYMN

Schlesische Volkslieder  
Arranged by BILL INGRAM (ASCAP)

Worshipfully ♩ = c. 95

mp mf mp f

I know the title is *Beautiful Savior*, but it's the same tune, and it's actually a different version of the same text. We won't go into that now. John Tsao will since *Christ, Upon the Mountain Stands*, and I'll finish the season off with a festive toccata on the Lutheran hymn *Rise, Shine, You People!* Maybe we'll learn that one some day too.

If you go in a store right now, don't spend time looking for the Transfiguration cards. Instead, you'll see Valentine's cards, candy, etc. Get something for whoever you love (and that can include yourself!). Enjoy some chocolate before you give it up for Lent. Tuesday night, have pancakes for supper, maybe some bacon or sausage, have a king cake and maybe some red beans and rice. Put on some jazz. Live it up before we get out the sackcloth and ashes.

Oh, one more thing – when I was in my first year in the Lutheran church in NC, they had an Epiphany party with a king cake. I was told the newest person on staff got to cut the cake first, and whoever found the baby hidden in the cake would have good luck in the year to come. (Funny when superstition and church cross paths!) I got to make the first cut, and wouldn't you know it, I got the baby with it. Little did I know at the time, but that was when Aiden became more than a twinkle in our eyes. It became quite the joke amongst the church staff, and I've been nervous about king cakes ever since. Superstition and good luck? Or was God letting me know a baby was on the way? Just more questions, and I don't know the answers. I don't need to.

God be with you till we meet again.

John