
Transfiguration: We Become What We Watch

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Last Epiphany – Year A

Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ...and later, Jesus led Peter and James and John up a high mountain, by themselves. And Jesus was transfigured before them. –Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17: 1-9

It was only a few years ago, maybe yesterday, that a lovely family invited guests to their home for dinner. The great husband and wife invited everybody, children too. At the table, finally, the mother turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, “Would you like to say the blessing?”

“I don’t know what to say,” the girl replied. The mother answered, “Oh, just say what you hear Mommy say.”

The daughter bowed her head and said, “Oh Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?”

That was a great child! I want to talk about great children, today, on this Baptism Sunday. Great children. Whether we are actual parents or not, all of us want great children. Ask any of these new parents here today whether they want strong children. Of course, they do. They want these little lambs to grow up strong. We all do.

So, I want to tell you a story— a Bible story—about great offspring. I wrote about this story a few weeks ago, but it is actually a Bible story that doesn’t get mentioned very often—probably because it seems so silly and non-scientific.

It is a story about how to have strong lambs, how to breed strong sheep. It is in Genesis, chapter 30, the story of how Jacob, the great patriarch, devised a plan to breed strong sheep.

Jacob actually lived with his father-in-law (Laban) for a while. Surely, many of you here today know what that is like. When the time came for Jacob and his father-in-law to go their separate ways, they had to divide the joint assets between them. Any of you in family businesses know what this is like, too! Back in the days of Jacob, the assets were sheep.

So Joseph arranged a deal with Laban. (Watch out, you fathers-in-law!) Jacob’s deal was that he, Jacob, would get all the lambs that were striped or spotted – and his father-in-law would get the rest. Basically, that meant for Jacob that he would get all the lambs that had some white in them (the white caused the stripes).

So, then Jacob does something strange. He went out and gathered the branches of poplar trees and almond trees. He peeled back the bark on those branches so that the white of the wood was showing. How was this behavior going to help him?

Well, when the strong sheep got ready to breed, Jacob planted the strips of wood in the ground, right in front of their eyes. His theory was that if the mother sheep and daddy sheep were looking at white streaks and white spots while they were raising children, then their resulting children would also have white streaks and white spots on them. Jacob put the branches only in front of the strong sheep, making sure that the strong sheep were seeing the streaks and spots; that way, their children—the strong lambs—would have streaks and spots. (It’s true; it’s right there in the Bible at Genesis 30.)

Isn’t that delightful? And it’s even more wonderful that it worked. The strongest of the new flock had stripes and spots, and the strongest of the flock belonged to Jacob.

I love that story. And I admit, joyfully, that it flies in the face of modern science and genetics and breeding technique. Do we really believe that when mother sheep and father sheep are looking at stripes when they are together, that they will have striped children? That takes some faith. Where is the faith of the great monk, Gregor Mendel, when you need him?

Well, I used to think that this story was silly. But not so now. In its odd way, the Bible often speaks of a deeper truth. The deeper truth is this: We become what we pay attention to. We become what we watch. You've heard it said, "We are what we eat." That may be true. But it is also true that "We are what we watch."

What we hear and watch during life makes a difference during our formation. And, more importantly, it makes a difference in how our children are formed, too. If we watch stripes all the time, we become striped. If we watch spots, we become spotted. If we watch pessimism all the time, we become pessimistic. If we watch hope all the time, we become hopeful. If we hear our mother complain about too many dinner guests...

Today's gospel story repeats a principle that Moses showed us. Jesus climbs a high mountain, taking with him his closest disciples, at a crucial turning point of his ministry. That ascent occurs just before he was to set his face toward Jerusalem, just before he set out for his promised land of suffering and resurrection. Jesus, like Moses, went up on a mountain. And Jesus, like Moses, entered a cloud of glory.

Apparently, Jesus was somehow transfigured, and his flesh shone with a beautiful, glistening white glory. Jesus saw something glorious in that event, and his disciples did, too. What Jesus saw changed him, gave him strength for what was to come.

The same thing was meant for his disciples, his followers, his children. Seeing Jesus so transfigured, they were to be strengthened to see this same Jesus on the cross of suffering not long afterwards. That is why we hear this gospel story just before we enter the season of Lent.

What we see changes us. What we watch changes us. What we watch transfigures us.

And what we present before the eyes of our children changes them. While we raise children, whatever stripes and spots we are watching, will be imprinted on them, too.

We have some parents here this morning who are presenting their children for baptism. They are exposing their children to other Christians. They are showing their children their hopes, and they are showing their children the Church. In doing so, I hope these parents are showing their children the transfiguring glory of God. What these children see will change them.

And so I ask something of all of us, today. I ask all of these parents of children being baptized, and I ask all the rest of us who want to produce strong and healthy offspring. I ask all of us today:

What are we showing our children? What are we presenting before our children? Are we showing them stripes, or spots? Are we showing them pessimism, or hope? Are we showing them ignorance, or love?

Will we show them how to walk up mountains ourselves, hoping to glimpse the overwhelming glory of God? I hope so. Do we show our children the holy way of Lenten disciplines and humility? Do we know that way ourselves? Do we commit to show our children an experience of the holy? I hope so.

I hope so. For what we show our children forms what they will become. What we show our children transfigures them. Christianity itself is not magic. Baptism is not a magic act that defeats the laws of science and nature and experience. Christian baptism proclaims a deep principle: that we become what we watch, what we hear, what we experience.

Baptism is the first glimpse, the first experience, of what it means to grow into the full stature of Christ. Then, over time, the Church reveals that experience of Christ over and over again. It is over time, every Sunday, that our baptisms become real and true. The more we show these little lambs Jesus Christ, the more they will grow into Christ themselves.

I realize that we Christians come to church for lots of reasons, some of those reasons quite spiritual, and some of those reasons not so spiritual. All those reasons are okay with me. I am simply glad people make the effort to be here. However,

whatever the reasons are that people might show up, I hope we all actually see something holy here.

Baptisms, and Church—and worship and prayer and community—are meant to show us a different sort of reality than the one we might see in the world. Yes, we often fall short; but our Christian worship and life—our Christian community—is meant to be a vision of nothing less than the kingdom of God. We are meant to see, and to show, something different here.

And then, over time, we are transfigured. We become what we watch. After Church—prayer, worship, community—we are meant to take what we have seen and touched, and then go out into the world with that new reality, as new people in Christ! We become what we watch! Ever so slowly, maybe with our classical Christian habits of patience and faith, the world can become what we watch, too.

AMEN.

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