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Bright For Life

Mark 9:2-9

Transfigure: Middle English, from an Anglo-French word, from the Latin, meaning: “to give a new and typically exalted or spiritual appearance to; to convert into a different form, state or substance; transform outwardly and usually for the better; to glorify or exalt something or someone.”

The Gospel writer, in trying to convey to his audience the transfiguration of Jesus into a more divine manifestation, his being changed into one no longer of this world, tells us the outward appearance of this transformation was that Jesus’ clothes became a dazzling white, such as no fuller – a person whose occupation was bleaching cloth white – could do. This vision of Jesus in heavenly glory as God’s beloved Son tells us that Jesus was seen having a non-earthly appearance.

But even more importantly, the inner transfiguration of Jesus, his exaltation as the Messiah, Savior, the beloved Son of God is revealed to the 3 disciples. The presence of Moses and Elijah with Jesus vindicates Jesus as the One sent by God. Jesus would and did not stay in Glory on the mountaintop but came down and suffered and died on the cross. Then, “closed in by death and sin in his tomb, Jesus made a path through them into the new life given by God,” opening up the possibility of this new life to all who hear and respond to the message of Jesus the Christ. It is in this Jesus that we see the light of the Gospel, revealing to us the glory of God.

An inner change, transformation, conversion are common themes in literature and movies. We see this as characters turn from putting themselves first, being greedy, wanting to control others, to putting others first, sometimes even to the point of sacrificing something of their own, maybe even their lives, for the sake of others.

This kind of change was always involved in the plot line of each episode of the TV show, *Touched By An Angel*. And we can certainly see this as the storyline unfolds for Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Almost every review about or article on the movie, *Chocolat* points out that transformation is a theme that runs through it.

The movie takes place in a fictional French village ruled by a Count. He is also the mayor and a wealthy landowner and landlord. He does everything he can to ensure that the villagers live by rules of propriety, just as his ancestors, all the previous Counts and Mayors of the village, had done. Life had come to the point where the villagers knew what was expected of them, what was their place in the scheme of things.

To help him in this endeavor to keep his village ‘clean’, the Count even offers suggestions to, actually most often rewriting, the sermons of the young priest serving the village church. The Count works constantly to rid the village of any ‘immorality’, anything that is a threat to the tranquility and tradition of the village.

Into this village at the beginning of Lent come a woman, Vianne, and her daughter. The woman opens up a Chocolate shop, of all things, at a time when, in their faith life, believers were to be focusing on sacrificing, giving up things, especially treats and snacks, as a way to live out the sacrifice of Jesus the Christ for humankind. The count and the priest, of course, encourage the villagers to remain faithful to the Lenten disciplines and stay away from the shop. Eventually, though, the villagers begin to drift into the chocolate shop, lured by treats displayed in the shop window, just to sample one of the confections, of course.

After they have first tasted, they keep coming back. They are drawn by the hospitality of Vianne, her welcome of any and everyone, including outcasts within the village, the wonderful chocolates she offers them, and that Vianne is able to tell each one what his or her favorite chocolate item is. As they continue to return and to enjoy the confections and the community of those in the shop, they begin to experience change in their dull, calm, and colorless lives. It is as if the chocolates they eat magically feed their needs.

One commentator wrote, “It is Vianne’s encouragement that brings one woman out of her abusive marriage. It is her encouragement that brings a woman together with her grandson. It is her encouragement that brings a widow of some 40 years out of mourning and into a new relationship.”

As he diligently is engaging in Lenten disciplines while all of this is happening in his village, the Count feels he must continue to battle against this woman and her chocolate shop. As Lent draws to a close, and he feels that he is losing the war, the Count enters the shop on the night before Easter intent on destroying its contents. But as he is doing so, his own transformation process begins. As the movie comes to an end, he no longer feels that it is his job to rid the village of any threat to its tranquility and tradition. He, too, has been transformed by Vianne’s grace and by her chocolates.

A Carol Miles wrote, “In the end, the moral message that emerges is that the “miracle of our Lord’s divine transformation” is recalling the way he lived and in emulating that humanity. True freedom comes in accepting others as they are, and allowing them the freedom to be all that God has created them to be.” It is in doing our best to emulate Christ’s humanity in our daily living that we share in Christ’s power to transform lives.

Jeffrey Rowthorn has written that we are called to witness to Christ’s purpose. In being called to Christ’s service, we are to work for the life abundant meant for each person. We never know in our giving and sharing, our offering of that proverbial ‘cup of cold water’ to friend or stranger when we might be part of the transformation of another, or even of ourselves. Preparing a meal for someone home from the hospital or those in a homeless shelter; knitting hats, mittens, scarves or shawls for those we may never meet; taking a friend or neighbor to a doctor’s appointment; sharing a cup of coffee a treat, and good conversation with a group of friends; donating to a cause that makes it possible for villagers to have a source of clean water; working with a group of others to fix up, even repair the home of those not able to do so on their own; bringing a friend to church; spending that time each week mentoring or tutoring a child in a local school; and much, much more are all ways you have been a ‘transforming’ presence in others’ lives.

The Presbyterian Church *Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study 2009* over and over tells of those who emulate Christ’s humanity in service for others, who have been a transforming presence in others’ lives. From the January 27th entry come these words:

Former mission co-worker Tom Johnson writes, ‘The Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger, the PC(USA’S) mission partner, has a vision in which the church

brings hope and light to Niger's rural people. Through the preparation of rural evangelists who study agriculture, practical trades, and literacy training in addition to the bible, The Church wants these evangelists to love the communities where they serve by offering both biblical and modern knowledge to improve people's lives.

'For example, the Dogon Gao Bible School started a goatherd in 2008. Students learn goat husbandry skills and have a chance to earn goats, which they take with them when they start their ministry in rural communities. The Church intends for evangelists to use the goats as a form of Christian witness, modeled after the traditional form of aid called *habaneyeye*. The offspring of these goats will be shared among the community, who will then repay the loans with their goats' offspring. This program will improve family incomes in the village and demonstrate the love of Christ to a hungry and hurting world.'

The February 11th entry reads:

Mr. Mtonga had worked for many years for a large cement company. When he became very sick, he discovered he was HIV positive. When he told his employer, he was fired and told to move out of the company-owned house. Then his wife and six children abandoned him and moved back to his wife's village. He stood by the side of the road. Mr. Mtonga had lost everything and had nowhere to go. He was thin and covered with sores. He asked anyone who walked by for help. Finally someone took him to the vicinity of the Lilayi Police College, where there is a home-based program sponsored by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP).

Around midnight, the police found Mr. Mtonga and took him to the home of a trained caregiver. Although she was a stranger, she became like a mother to him. She allowed him to bathe, gave him clean clothes, fed him, and found him a place to stay. The caregiver told Mr. Mtonga about antiretroviral (ARV) medications and urged him to go to one of the few clinics that distribute them. She cleaned his lodgings, provided spiritual and psychological support, cooked the nutritious meals needed by anyone taking ARVs, provided personal care, and ensured he always had his medication.

As he got stronger, Mr. Mtonga began attending the CCAP church. Over the next two years he regained his health, went to work, and became transformed. He said, 'I have seen God's work.'

We can see Jesus not only as our brother, but also as the transfigured grace of life. This vision can inspire us to be generous in sharing Christ's love and all that he has given us. Bringing a touch of life and hope to another's life, living out and sharing with another Christ's love for each person can be moments of transfiguration that recognize how God gives new reason, meaning and purpose to our lives.