The Transfiguration of our Lord

The metamorphosis of Jesus so that sinners can be too
Mark 9:2-9
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
analysis by Ed Schroeder

Sabbatarians,
Sunday a week hence is already the Last Sunday after Epiphany. That makes it The Transfiguration of Our Lord. In the Revised Common Lectionary Mark 9:2-9 is the day’s Gospel. Lent begins but three days thereafter. Last year (1996 – Lectionary Year A) Sabb.theol. #4 offered a Crossings matrix for this pericope in Matthew’s rendering. Some of that is core synoptic theology and belongs also to Mark’s version, so I have borrowed accordingly.

INTRODUCTION:

Mark, like Matthew, (but not Luke) uses the Greek term “metamorphosis” for naming the transaction on the mountain. That term may be homiletically useful with its analogy to insect life sequences that many of us learned in school biology classes. Verse 9 urges us to consider this pericope as an Easter-preview, i.e., guaranteed to be mis-interpreted, as Peter clearly shows
in v. 5, apart from the last chapter of “the Good News of Jesus the Christ, God’s Son”(1:1). The immediately preceding pericope, Mark 8:31ff., is the third passion prediction plus Peter’s rebuking Jesus for even mentioning it, and all this coming immediately after Peter’s “correct” confession about Jesus’ identity. All this is Mark signalling to his readers that Jesus is both the “ochlos” Messiah of Good Friday (see Sabb. theol. #39) and the Luminous Lord of Easter. As metamorphosis these apparent opposites are no more antithetical than the caterpillar version and the butterfly version of the same insect.

When you grant the Easter overtones to this Transfiguration text, then it nicely provides a closing bracket to the Epiphany season. Here at the final Sunday of Epiphany we have a matching episode to the opening bracket, the Gospel on the first Sunday of the season, Jesus’ baptism. There too the heavenly voice designated Jesus the servant-son, the approved one (ala Isaiah 42). In Mark 9 the affirmation is repeated with the addendum to “listen to him.”

Here’s a possible Crossings matrix for the Markan text.

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**THE TEXT’S DIAGNOSIS: DISCIPLES NOT METAMORPHOSED**

**STEP 1.** Despite the marvelous illumination, still in the dark about Jesus. Ranking him in the same line-up of other OT revealers: Moses, Elijah. Peter’s three booths proposal signals that he is not yet seeing/making any distinction. Even though Christians today live with the story’s last chapter (Easter) wide open, we’re still vexed with the problem of mis-valuing Jesus. Seeing him as another great revealer, maybe even the greatest, but no qualitative difference. Western secular culture for sure, can acknowledge Jesus as a Moses-sort of lawgiver, and/or a radical Elijah-like prophet. But that still leaves us
lost in the wilderness.

**STEP 2.** Fear, rightful fear. When face to face with God, fear is the proper posture for a sinner. But not so when Jesus has taken you along to face the divine majesty. The three chief disciples are not (yet) “listening to him.” Their fear is coupled with not using Jesus as their own “cover” for facing God. Fear in NT language is the opposite of faith. Fear is un-faith.

[Excursus: Read it and weep. An Aussie pastor sent me a photocopy this week of the new edition of Luther’s Small Catechism just printed down under. The Lutheran publishers have excised “fear” from Luther’s explanation of the ten commandments. No longer are Aussie Lutherans to learn that we are to “fear, love and trust in God,” but to “honor, love and trust God” instead. The wimpy notion that “fearing God” even in the NT is not really fear, but rather “respect, reverence, honor” has here won the day. These Lutherans appear to have un-learned the primal law-gospel distinction about responding to God.

Luther parsed it this way: “Fear” is the Biblically appropriate response for sinners confronting God on their own, without a Christ-cover. The trouble with many whom Jesus encounters in the gospels is that they do NOT fear God. Thus Jesus in Luke 12:5 makes it explicit that God is the only proper one to be feared, and he gives his reason for saying that.

By the same token “love and trust” is the rightful—and, yes indeed, opposite—response for the same sinners confronting the same God when they are clothed in Christ’s garments. There is no way that we can read “fear” in the NT, as in this Markan text, and call it honor. It’s too late to stop the presses in Adelaide. Let’s hope for a second edition—soon!]

**STEP 3.** Not “listening” to the Son of God’s favor leaves people (even disciples) in God’s disfavor. If Jesus is #3 in a sequence
with Elijah and Moses, then he is not the changer (metamorphoser) of the Moses-Elijah covenant. The words Moses brings from God at Sinai are grim for uncovered sinners if the Sinai contract is all they have going for them: “God visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children until the third and fourth generations.” Simply stated: Sinners die. Is the ministry of Elijah any different? Just ask Ahab, Jezebel, the Baal prophets, or Ahaziah. He too never deviates from the specs of the Sinai contract.

THE TEXT’S NEW PROGNOSIS WHEN JESUS IS ON THE SCENE:

STEP 4. Good news for Step 3. The metamorphosis of Jesus. Big change. First of all he is a big change vis-a-vis Moses and Elijah and the covenant he is fulfilling. He fraternizes/fellowships with sinners. It is precisely for sinners, Sinai-covenant failures, that this Son of Man is on the scene. Of course, such action with sinners is costly grace. Costs him his own life. That leads, however, to another metamorphosis: God Easters him from the grave. And about that Eastering (and the Pentecost that follows) the voice from heaven says: Listen to him—not to any others, even any other of the big wigs of the OT.

STEP 5. Good news for Step 2. Actually listening to him. Call it faith. The turf here is the heart. Faith displaces fear. Switching our headphones from all the other persons/programs we listen to (and trust), especially in our day when our culture, the media and the manifold communication superhighways inundate us with other programs to listen to, to trust. Listening to the metamorphosed Jesus brings with it a similar metamorphosis in the listener. To move from the ear to the eye metaphor: “listening to him” equals “seeing only Jesus.”
STEP 6. Good news for Step 1. Tenting on earth, not up on the heavenly mountains. Now “knowing what to say.” Now “telling what we have seen.” Such clarity about the metamorphosed Jesus and the subsequent metamorphosis of ourselves gets lived out in the world. Confession. Discipleship. Having received the costly grace of this beloved son, we live our own lives as the “tent” for him to dwell in. But such tenting is not having a tent for Jesus alongside of other tents in which we dwell with others of his competitors. Such living, such tent-making, is done fearlessly, eyes open, heads lifted up.

Peace & Joy! Ed