

Break the Cocoon **Mark 9:2-9**

Who is Jesus to you?

As you know, Juhee had an ordination interview two weeks ago. Since it was a zoom, interview, I was able to overhear some interview questions. The first interview question was “Who is Jesus to you?” I didn’t expect this very basic question would be included in an ordination interview since most candidates are already serving the church as pastors. But I also realized this question must be asked of all people.

My friend once told me about his interview experience with an ordination candidate. His team had an excellent candidate with many strengths but could not approve the person for ordination because that person did not believe in Jesus Christ. The person had good recommendations and excellent academic credentials. His theological writing was excellent but he didn’t believe Jesus as his Savior. So the committee recommended that he believe in Jesus Christ before coming back.

We can have very different understandings of Jesus. We understand Jesus as our savior, a good friend, the Messiah, liberator, healer, exorcist, victorious warrior or moral teacher. Who is Jesus to you? Who is he really for you?

Just like us, the disciples of Jesus Christ and other people had their own perceptions of Jesus. Most people understood Jesus as a miracle worker who healed their diseases and casted out demons. Some saw Jesus as a prophet and teacher while others perceived him as a dangerous political instigator. Even Jesus’ disciples didn’t know who he really was. Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah but he understood him as a political Messiah. So when Jesus taught his disciples about his death and resurrection, Peter began to rebuke Jesus and of course Jesus reproached him, saying “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” There were confusions about who Jesus was even among disciples.

Transfiguration

Six days later, “Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. And he was transformed, right before their eyes.” He was transformed. Don’t get it wrong. Jesus didn’t transform himself but he was transformed by God. This was God’s act. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than any bleach could make them. And three disciples saw Jesus in all his glory with Elijah and Moses talking with him. The three disciples could see the dazzling splendor of the transfiguration.

What caught my attention was Peter’s reaction. “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Why did he want to build shelters? There are many interpretations about this. Karoline Lewis, a professor of biblical preaching at Luther Seminary offers an interesting view. She understood Peter’s unconscious reaction as a kind of denial of the change. Quote, “I think Peter’s issue is the realization that if Jesus changes, then Peter will be changed as well. “I cannot be the same. I will also be transfigured, transformed. And maybe I don’t want that. So, let’s pitch some tents, keep things the way they are, hunker down, and ride it out. Maybe the whole thing will just pass by. I can come out of my tent and all will still be the same. Jesus will be the same. I will still be the same.” (Karoline Lewis)

Peter recognized Jesus as the political Messiah but he refused to change his wrong perception and was rebuked by Jesus. He now encountered the transfiguration of Jesus, a

complete change of his master but still, he didn't want to be changed so he tried to bury his head in the sand and wait for the storm to pass.

I see a lot of resemblance between us and Peter. Most people including myself and churches do not like a change. Many churches want to grow but don't want to change. [ppt] So they look for "an innovative pastor with a fresh new vision who will inspire the church to remain exactly the same." However, a change is an essential part of our lives. Also, a change is a sign of life. [ppt] The tree in the front yard of the church seems dead during the winter but we all know that when spring comes, its branches will be softened and it will be covered with green and change its color according to the season. Only a dead tree would remain the same.

As the body of Christ, we, Asbury UMC, need to open ourselves to transfiguration instead of trying to build a shelter until the storm passes. As Jesus was transformed by God and completely offered himself for God's mission, we also need to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who can remold us for God's glory. Of course, this change is not a guarantee for church growth or personal glory.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus is the halfway point of the Gospel. The stories before the transfiguration introduce the person of Jesus and his ministry of healing and teaching and how he gained popularity among the people. But after the transfiguration, Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, and toward the passion of Holy Week. The transfiguration is a turning point in the radical change of Jesus' journey. Jesus moves toward the cross, his death and resurrection.

We need Transformation

We need transfiguration. Our church needs transfiguration. Two weeks ago, I participated a seminar about developing local church mission ideas. The speaker said that most churches assumed they are actively serving and doing mission works for the community while most of their resources and energy are used to maintain the church. To know if the church really serves the community, one question needs to be asked. "If our church closed, who is going to be most disappointed and sad?" The answer reveals where our hearts and energy are.

I know it is a difficult question for us... but think about it. If Asbury UMC closed, who is going to be sad? Of course, our beloved Asbury family members. Boycott will surely be disappointed. People in our town will miss our bazar and Christmas Swedish coffee bread. Project Outreach team will surely be sad. Who else would be missing our church? If our neighbors would not feel much of a loss, it means we are not really engaging with or doing mission with them.

As a pastor, I always struggle with how to balance sustaining the church and carrying out God's mission. There is no clear-cut answer for this dilemma. We all would agree we have to serve our neighbors, help the poor, work for justice and do mission for God. But at the same time, we acknowledge that we have limited human and financial resources and most of our time and budget is eaten up maintaining our church. Our mission does not always lead to church growth and so we have become careful about spending money and initiating new mission projects that would require a big budget. When this becomes a pattern, we do the same things over and over expecting a different result, which is the definition of 'insanity.'

We need transfiguration. We need to break the cocoon to be a beautiful new creation! The term 'transformed' in Greek is 'metamorphothe,' from which we get metamorphosis. When do we use the word metamorphosis? You must remember your science class and talking about butterflies. The process of changing from an ugly caterpillar into a breathtakingly beautiful

butterfly is metamorphosis, a complete change! What we need is not a new church-growth project or stewardship program but transfiguration, a complete transformation from inside out!

How?

How can we do it? We cannot. Transfiguration is God's work so we cannot initiate the change. There is a story. A seasoned pastor observed a young pastor who was involved in many kinds of service and all kinds of good works. He asked the young pastor, "Why do you do so many good works?"

"Because I am trying to make myself acceptable to God," the young pastor proudly said. Then, the old pastor set a tile before the young pastor, and began to polish it.

"What are you doing?", the young pastor asked.

"I am polishing this tile, to make it into a mirror," he replied.

"You can't make a tile into a mirror by polishing it!", the young pastor protested.

"And neither can you make yourself acceptable to God by good works," the old pastor answered.

Like this short story, we are unable to transfigure ourselves only with our own effort. A tile cannot be a mirror. While we cannot do it, God can transfigure us to be new beings. As apostle Paul said, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The starting point for the transfiguration is waiting for and listening to Jesus Christ, the living word of God. How can we listen to the voice of Jesus Christ? Through Worship, reading the Bible, and prayer. They are traditional and primary ways to listen to Jesus Christ. John Wesley calls them a means of grace. These spiritual practices themselves do not change us, but they surely help us to experience the grace and love of God, which transforms us. As we respond to God's grace and break the cocoon... we would experience metamorphosis.

The season of Lent will begin this Wednesday. Lent is a time of self-examination and reflection. Lent is a time to focus on our relationship with God, and to listen to his words. Please rebuild your spiritual muscle through these spiritual exercises and wait for transformation.

I pray that this 40 days of Lent will be a time of metamorphosis for our beloved Asbury UMC. As we are changed by the divine light of Christ, we will become beautiful graceful butterflies that glorify God in the world. Amen.