

## TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD – Feb 11, 2018

### *Coming Attractions!*

(Mark 9:2-9)

Like many of you, I'm sure, I love going to the movies. Now, the fact is, I can't *afford* going as often, anymore, with the prices as they are these days! But nevertheless I just love the experience; always have. There's something about sitting in a theater with other people and sharing that unique moment, and feeding off each other's reactions and emotions. Often I have later watched the very same movie at home, especially by myself, and it just wasn't the same; no matter how good a movie it was or how much I liked it even. There was something lacking; something missing.

That's because there is something *transformative*, even *mesmerizing*, if you will, about watching a movie in the theater; isn't there? The actors are "larger than life" – literally. And it's almost impossible not to find yourself getting caught up in what's happening on the screen.

Now I'm too young to remember when a movie ticket also bought you – besides the feature presentation of course – a newsreel catching you up on all the week's events (in those days before the 24/7 news cycle), as well as a cartoon (like Bugs Bunny or Tom and Jerry), and maybe even a serial film installment (like Buck Rogers or Dick Tracy) with their weekly cliffhangers.

But even after these extras were no longer a part of the movie-going experience – and this is what I *do* remember, however – studios (then as well as even now) still gave us a little something; something called the "Coming Attractions." You know what I'm talking about here. Those movie trailers of upcoming films preceded and introduced by a bright green screen with the words emblazoned across it:

“The Following PREVIEW Has Been Approved For ALL AUDIENCES By The Motion Picture Association Of America.”

I don't know about you, but quite often these previews, these coming attractions, leave me anxiously waiting for a particular movie's release. They not only catch my attention, but they also leave me wanting to see the entire film when it finally does come out...

Well, the reason why I'm mentioning all this is that, in our *Sundays And Seasons* guide to worship planning, produced by the ELCA's Augsburg/Fortress publishing house, I was struck by the following synopsis of this morning's gospel reading: “Mark's gospel,” it said, “presents the transfiguration as a *preview* of what would become apparent to Jesus' followers after he rose from the dead. Confused disciples are given a vision of God's glory manifest in the beloved Son.”

Interesting... The transfiguration as a *preview* of what was to come. Sort of like a movie preview or trailer in the theater. A kind of “coming attraction,” if you will.

And the more I reflected on this idea of the transfiguration as a preview of what was yet to come; a highlight of what the disciples could expect when Jesus' true identity finally became apparent to them, the more I saw the parallels between this mountaintop experience, on the one hand, and a typical movie theater experience, on the other.

For one thing, Jesus suddenly became a larger-than-life figure for those disciples who witnessed this vision. Not unlike what happens in the movie theater when we suddenly view ordinary men and women – actors and actresses – being somehow *transformed* into memorable, iconic, even inspiring personalities up there on the big screen.

The word “transfiguration,” you see, literally means “a change of form or appearance.” In fact, the Greek word here *metamorphoo* (meta-mor-pho’-o) is where the word “metamorphosis” (describing how caterpillars change into butterflies, for instance) actually comes from.

Our gospel reading, of course, tells us that, up on that high mountain – accompanied by Peter, James, and John – Jesus was *transfigured* before them. In other words, there was a change – a significant change even – in his appearance. In particular, we are told, his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could ever bleach them.

Now Matthew and Luke go even further, as it turns out. Luke says that “the appearance of his face” changed as well. And Matthew adds that “his face shone like the sun.”

So here’s the thing. Jesus’ inner circle of disciples – again, Peter, James, and John – witness this change in Jesus; a new face, a new look, a new image. And in keeping with the parallels I’m drawing here, between the transfiguration and those coming attractions we see at the movies, I would suggest to you that the very same dynamic is at work. Again the ordinary men and women up on the movie screen are *transformed* before our very eyes, aren’t they?. In fact, their transformation is no accident, but actually calculated and intentional.

For example, Issur Danielovitch Densky did not like the image his name projected – especially as an aspiring actor. So he changed it to Kirk Douglas instead. And the rest is history.

In the same way, Frances Gum – who had a rather dowdy-sounding name, don't you think? – transfigured *herself*, if you will, into that vivacious singer and actress known to millions of fans as Judy Garland.

And no one would have ever paid money to go see a western hero named Marion Morrison in the movies, most likely. But they certainly responded to John Wayne, didn't they?

Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko certainly sounds like the name of a Russian spy. Indeed, her parents were actually Russian and Ukrainian immigrants. But we, of course, know her as actress Natalie Wood, who as a child starred in the classic Christmas movie *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*.

And who now is *back* in the news because her still unsolved death remains a mystery, even after nearly four decades.

Or consider this. How many women would have swooned over a leading man and heart throb named Leroy Harold Scherer, Jr. A Hollywood leading man named Leroy? But they sure did after he transformed himself into Rock Hudson.

Norma Jean Mortenson sounds like the name of an ordinary housewife, doesn't it? Which she actually was at one point, marrying for the first time at the tender age of 16. But once she totally changed *her* image and took the name Marilyn Monroe, of course, she never looked back. And neither did anyone else.

But perhaps the most memorable example of this type of transformation in the movies involved the English-born Archibald, also known as "Archie," Leach. Poor and abandoned, he hit the road with a team of traveling acrobats at the age of 14. But within 10 years he had cultivated a unique accent and personal style, landed in California, and signed a lucrative contract with

Paramount pictures. And four years after that had become a major Hollywood star. His name? Cary Grant.

Showtime has recently been televising the documentary “Becoming Cary Grant.” It’s a fascinating look – using his own words and home movies – at how someone could utterly transform himself; that is, to take on a brand new persona. He once famously said, “Everyone wants to *be* Cary Grant. Even *I* want to be Cary Grant.” And so that’s who he became.

Now I’m probably belaboring the point here, but what I’m trying to illustrate is how movie actors and actresses, especially the famous ones, are able to totally remake themselves and often become someone completely different than who they originally were. And, in the process, become someone unforgettable as well...

It must have seemed very much like that with Jesus, I think. Coming from humble beginnings, he lived and worked in virtual obscurity until approximately the age of 30; fairly old for that time period to still be single and living at home. But just around that age, he leaves his home and family in Nazareth, and his profession as a carpenter, and becomes an itinerant rabbi instead. And as the weeks turn into months, he soon attracts a significant following; people who are drawn to his preaching and teaching and healing.

But, even so, most people still saw him, I would imagine, as Jesus the carpenter turned rabbi from Nazareth. Even his closest disciples; his inner circle, the guys who knew him best.

Yet all of a sudden, high up on that mountaintop, there’s this uniquely transforming and even mesmerizing event; a vision. Suddenly Jesus isn’t just Jesus anymore. Suddenly his appearance is altered, and there’s a voice

from the cloud that has overshadowed them, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

And, in that precise moment, these three disciples have a *preview*, a *coming attraction* if you will, of what the future holds. Like moviegoers sitting in a theater and witnessing Hollywood actors and actresses take on a completely new identity up on the big screen, these three disciples, find it impossible to not get caught up in the moment.

Jesus is transfigured before them, you see; completely. He no longer looks the same. He is changed. And it has a profound impact on them. So much so that they don’t want this experience to end apparently. They are so caught up, and interested in prolonging it, that Peter even offers set up some tents; one for Jesus and one each for Moses and Elijah who have apparently made cameo appearances; just like film legends who briefly show up in our favorite movies.

Now I don’t know about you, but whenever I’m in a movie theater watching a great film, I don’t want it to end either! An entire two hours can pass in the blink of an eye. And if it was up to me – with great films, that is – I could literally stay there all night.

Funny story. My mom relates how she and my grandmother went to the movies to see the Disney animated classic: “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” when it first came out in 1937. That would have made mom about 9 years old at the time.

Now, back then, there was no limit to how many times you could stay for the movie. In other words, your admission ticket was good all day.

So mom and grandma went to the very first showing of “Snow White” that morning, and they were completely and utterly transfixed and enthralled. So much so, that when it was over they remained in their seats.

Until, eventually, the theater’s house lights went up after the movie’s final showing... *that evening*. You got it! They had sat there watching “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” over and over again, from its first showing in the morning until its final showing that evening. Without even realizing it! That’s how captivated they were.

Well, I imagine the very same thing happening here in today’s gospel reading. The disciples are so utterly captivated by what they are witnessing, at the complete transformation of Jesus that they are privy to, that they don’t want this magical moment to ever end either. They could have stayed there all night; indefinitely even.

But just as my mom and grandmother had to get up and leave the theater after the house lights came up for a final time that day, this magical mountaintop experience had to end for Peter, James, and John as well. Because immediately after that voice from the cloud confirmed Jesus’ true identity, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” the cloud dissipated, the cameo appearances from biblical legends Moses and Elijah abruptly came to an end, and when the disciples looked around (we are told), they saw no one with them anymore, except for Jesus.

Their preview of things to come, their coming attractions, had ended. And they had to go back down the mountain, down into the valley below, and resume their daily lives.

And according to what we know from scripture, of course, those lives were filled with difficulty and challenge; even danger. But somehow this

mountaintop experience sustained them in the days that followed; including and especially the tough times they ultimately faced leading up to and including the betrayal, arrest, and death of their good friend and teacher, Jesus. This sneak preview of Jesus' *true* identity, then, was a source of strength and comfort that they were later able to draw on when the going got tough, as they say.

I don't know about you, but a great movie, a wonderful film, can inspire and motivate me long after I've left the theater and gone home. Even a good trailer, a preview of an upcoming film, can get me excited and leave me anxiously waiting for a particular upcoming movie's release.

And, again, I think that's exactly what we have here. Coming attractions for what awaits us as Jesus' followers. A sneak peek at who he really is and what he has come to do. A source of inspiration when the going gets tough. And it *will* get tough; for all of us.

But here in this gospel trailer, so to speak, in this short clip of that amazing mountaintop experience; we have a brief glimpse of what awaits us. A preview of what is yet to come for those who wait patiently in faith.

And just like those bright green screens that precede and introduce our movie trailers at the theater, *this* preview has been approved for all audiences as well, and by our Lord himself...

Our gospel reading this morning ends with Jesus and the disciples coming down the mountain, and Jesus ordering them to tell no one about what they had seen, until *after* the Son of Man had risen from the dead. It reminds me of a story...



A number of years ago, The Rev. Barbara Berry-Bailey, an ELCA pastor, was called for jury duty in Philadelphia where she was serving at the time. And after sitting in the selection room from early in the morning until noontime, without ever having her name called, those – like her – who were still remaining were allowed to go to lunch, as long as they returned within 45 minutes.

So she walked from the courthouse over to the Reading Terminal Market, and ordered a corn beef sandwich on rye, and a cream soda. She then headed back to the courthouse.

She was wearing her clerical collar that day and, as was often the case when she did while out in public, she soon became aware of people trying to stare at her without *trying* to stare, if you know what I mean.

I guess seeing a woman wearing a collar is still a little unusual for some people.

Anyway, during her walk back to the courthouse, she noticed one person in particular wearing sunglasses, and coming towards her, who apparently made no bones about staring. So she looked right back at him.

But here's the thing, it was a cold, windy, winter day, and seeing this guy wearing sunglasses staring at her seemed rather odd, to say the least. As he got closer, she wondered what was the deal with those sunglasses on an overcast day? And then she recognized him; she and no one else in center-city Philly.

As he passed by, *she* gasped out loud and *he* merely smiled. You see, no one else had recognized actor Bruce Willis that day wearing a beat-up old jacket, wrinkled pants, a baseball cap, and those sunglasses. In other words, it was their little secret. You see, she also sensed that he wanted to maintain his

anonymity. And so, as much as she wanted to go up and engage him and talk to him, she didn't.

Well that's the way it was following the transfiguration, I imagine. The disciples had had this sneak preview of Jesus. No one else recognized him for who he really was; only them. But, just like Bruce Willis that day, Jesus wanted his true identity – for the time being at least – to remain a secret. So that's what the disciples did.

Only later, and *after* the resurrection, when they were now free to proclaim Jesus' true identity, did they finally reveal what they had witnessed up there on the mountaintop when Jesus was transfigured before them. That moment when they had a wonderful preview of what was yet to come. Amen.