

Title: The Transfiguration Was Awesome

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, your son was marvelously transfigured on the holy mountain before his friends, may we find moments of wonder and learn more about the world around us, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

This is an old story. You may have heard it before. A little boy was out in his backyard, throwing a ball up in the air. An elderly passerby, not accustomed to such youthful delights, asked the boy what he was doing. He replied, "I am playing a game of catch with God. I throw the ball up in the air and he throws it back."

The Law of Gravity, a scientific law, we know well. It also true that on those occasions we go to the mountain top, we need to come back down. Jesus led his inner circle down from the mountain to face all kinds of problems. But they had a glimpse of something fantastic. After that great vision came the main point of the experience, from the voice, "listen to him."

What can science say about the transfiguration? Did what we hear read really happen or was it based on something real, but later exaggerated, or was it a fabrication? I'll give you the bottom line right now. We can never know.

It is like the issue of God. Science cannot prove that God exists and so many scientists assume that God does not exist. But if scientists used that same logic with something like the Big Bang Theory then that theory would never float. When it comes to religion, many scientists fail to use their own methods. The scientific method first involves a hypothesis, experiments are formed to prove or disprove the hypothesis. If there is some success, then the hypothesis may be promoted to a theory. But science allows for theories to be accepted as something approaching truth, but not really true. It is a theory, after all.

Take the Big Bang, for example. The Big Bang Theory was, at first, dismissed by most astronomers. It was the Steady-State Theory that was the most popular. But continued observations were better explained by the Big Bang Theory than the Steady-State Theory. Eventually the Steady-State

Theory was discarded. But continued observations did not fit the Big Bang Theory either. So the Big bang Theory continues to be modified. Now Astrophysicists concede that we will never know what exactly happened at the Big Bang. Before we thought that the universe was all of creation. Now some are saying that other universes are possible.

What all this points to is what I said in the SACRAMENTO BEE a week ago. Science and religion ask two different questions. There is no need for science and religion to clash, because our realms are different. Science asks how something works or something happened. Religion asks why something happened or something works.

For example, science deals with the notion of evil as a psychological or psychiatric disorder that can be fixed for some people, but not for others. The “others” need to be put away until such time that a cure can be obtained. But this is a very inexact science in that mental health professionals can never really definitively say that some is cured of a mental disorder that exhibits itself as an absence of love. And that is how I personally define evil – an absence of love. Josh Powell who killed himself and his sons a few weeks ago in Seattle is an example of evil.

Religion does not concern itself with cures for evil, per say. Religion wants to know why there is evil. The Bible has several explanations for why there is evil. The famous one is the story of Adam and Eve. We use Adam as a proper name, but the adam is actually a Hebrew word, *adam*, that literally means humankind. Evil entered the world through humankind. God did not create evil. God created an evil-free zone. It was human beings who brought evil into the world through our misuse of free will. The story asks why is there evil? It not a story of how human beings were made.

It was common knowledge in ancient times and in the Bible that God or the gods blessed certain people and they prospered. On the other hand, people God or the gods did not like were cursed. Greek mythology has many of these kinds of stories. The Book of Job in the Bible is largely a poem about a successful, righteous man who has a series of calamities whose origins are in the heavenly court. Job is a very old story told in many Middle Eastern cultures – much older than the Bible story. The Bible story adds an epic poem to the story. What the biblical version of Job addresses is why bad

things happen to good people. It rebuts the notion that the righteous are blessed and the wicked are cursed.

Jesus confronts demon possessed people and orders the demons out of them, particularly in Mark's gospel. The demons are never destroyed. Presumably they take up residence in some other poor soul. Demons represent evil. When people are made "good" as it is said in Genesis, then there must be some force that makes them evil – hence demons. Thus Jesus confronts and defeats evil. The ultimate battle takes place on the cross when evil incarnate is defeated once and for all time.

Science now concedes that many of the questions we have about nature will never be answered. A theory gains universal recognition when there are no exceptions to it and then it becomes a law of science. There are very few laws of science. Newton's Laws of Motion are examples of scientific laws. But these laws require a perfect environment that we now know doesn't exist.

I grew up being told that space was a vacuum – in other words, there was no air. But what is our atmosphere? It is made up of gases. Well, it turns out that space is full of gas. Our solar system moves against galactic gases. Some of it bleeds through the solar system. It is our solar wind that keeps most of it out. And in fact there is matter in the universe that we have no explanation for. Since scientists have no idea what it is, they call it dark matter, because they can't see it.

I've talked a lot about astrophysics, but that is merely an illustration of the difficulties science has in asking the "how" question. If we look at the Transfiguration as a how question, we miss the point of the story in the gospels. It isn't there for us to ask how – it is there for us to ask, why.

Religion also has trouble asking the why question. Evil is a good example. We can look at the second creation story and say that humans brought evil into the world and the why is because of free will, but we are still disturbed. We read and hear about Josh Powell with anger and sadness. So we ask why and are left with few answers. Maybe it was Josh's controlling and abusive father. Maybe it was Josh's trouble with women. (He may have killed the two witnesses who may have linked him to his wife's disappearance, his two sons.)

And we ask why a government would kill its own people like what is happening in Syria. Well, power is probably a good answer. When we excessively seek something through sinful ways, we slip into evil. This is when our needs exceed those of others. We cease to love others. We break Jesus' second commandment. When we cannot love others, we cannot love God. Josh Powell couldn't even love his own sons. Bashar al-Assad does not love his people.

Why does evil happen? It happens when there is an absence of love.

The transfiguration was an opportunity for a vision of total love to be seen by three ordinary people. Three ordinary people saw something extraordinary. I'm sure that the story was impossible to put into words. It was a sign of a glorious future for us. We will never be able to explain how it happened. And that is why science can't deal with something like the Transfiguration.

In a sense, the Transfiguration is an answer to the question of why Jesus came. The disciples are really unclear about the answer to that. They follow Jesus even if they don't fully know why. They assume that Jesus is the messiah who will lead an army against the Romans and will then assume David's throne as king. The story happens a week after Jesus first tells them that he is going to Jerusalem to be executed and rise again. Peter rebukes Jesus and they continue blissfully ignorant of what is coming. Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me Satan." Satan is the personification of evil. Peter is putting his needs ahead of Jesus' plan.

Both science and religion produce awe. We humans are drawn to the feeling of awe. The Transfiguration was awesome. The Big Bang was awesome. May we continue to ask questions. May we continue to seek understanding. Whether we ask questions of science or religion, we will encounter awesome things.

Text: **Mark 9:2-9** (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one<sup>1</sup> on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup> And there

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<sup>1</sup> Gk *no fuller*

appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,<sup>m</sup> one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”<sup>6</sup> He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.<sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved;<sup>n</sup> listen to him!”<sup>8</sup> Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>m</sup> Or *tents*

<sup>n</sup> Or *my beloved Son*

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 9:2–9). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.