

Lent in Art

A Visual Devotional

Raphael

The Transfiguration



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Instructions

Monday

Read Luke 9:28-36 and compare the account with the painting.

Read the section that is entitled “The Reading.” This will help you gain insight into the painting.

Wednesday

Read Luke 9:37-45 and compare the account with the painting.

Take another look at the painting, pay attention to the contrast between the top and bottom portions of the painting.

Friday

Read “The Contemplation” section.

How are these two stories connected? What is the connection between them?

In what sense do we battle evil today? What are some examples of your personal battle and what are some examples of a broader battle?

How do you strengthen your faith?

What will you do to improve your faith and prayer?

In Luke 9:51 we have an interesting verse. It says: As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem (NIV). As you help your kids with the activity below, keep this interesting idea in your mind. The Transfiguration is believed to have occurred in the very northernmost part of Israel. Both Caesarea-Phillipi where Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah and Mt. Hermon, the most likely spot for the Transfiguration are in the north. Mt. Hermon is also the highest point in Israel. It is from this peak, both in the ministry of Jesus and the geography of Israel that Jesus begins his descent to Jerusalem. His path to Jerusalem probably took him through the Jordan River valley, known as the Rift Valley. The Rift Valley (specifically the Dead Sea) is the the lowest place on the earth. So picture the movement of Jesus as going from the highest point in Israel to the lowest point and you have an interesting geographical message.

Now compare that with the odd passage from Ephesians 4:8-9: Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? Normally, we might associate this movement as being from heaven to earth and then back to heaven. What is interesting is to see that movement traced geographically in the physical travels of Jesus to the highest point in his world to the lowest point in the world, then ascending to the presence of the Father.



Kids Activity

Do some map work with your kids. Locate on a map the major places of Jesus' ministry:

- Birthplace in Bethlehem
- Hometown in Nazareth
- Baptism in the Jordan River
- Jerusalem (the home of the Temple, Crucifixion, etc.)
- Sea of Galilee
- Capernaum
- Bethany
- Caesarea Philippi
- Mt. Hermon

Your kids (and you) may have a difficult time understanding what a Transfiguration is. Good luck explaining it to them, ha-ha. It is ok to say that it is difficult to know exactly what Transfiguration is, and you don't have to fake that you know. Stick to the description in the text. The Greek word translated "transfiguration" is the word "metamorphosis." Something changed while Jesus was praying. The appearance of his face became different, his clothes appeared white and bright, clouds and lightning formed, men who died long ago suddenly appeared with Jesus, and they experienced the presence of the glory of God in sight and sound. It was a dramatic and memorable event.

Ask your kids:

Is there some memory you have that sticks out to you more than others? Why does it stick out?

Is there someone you know who has died that you would like to see again?

Tell your kids how proud you are of them and how grateful you are that they are your children.



The Reading



Raphael, - Transfiguration

Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, commonly known as Raphael, was one of the greatest artists of the High Italian Renaissance. Today we are going to look at the last work he painted, The Transfiguration.

Commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici (later to become Pope Clement VII) in 1517 for the Cathedral of Narbonne in France. Raphael died before he completed the altarpiece and there has been debate over how much of the painting was actually his work and how much was completed by his assistants. In 1977 the painting underwent a major restoration which confirmed that the composition of the entire work was Raphael's, and his assistants completed some unfinished areas after his death.

The work is complicated and has generated debate ever since Raphael painted it. Much of the debate centers on how to connect the two scenes portrayed in the painting. The top register shows the transfiguration of Christ recorded in Luke 9:28-36. The lower register shows the healing of a possessed boy from Luke 9:37-45.



Let's examine the top register. There are 8 figures in total. Christ floats above the ground illuminated by a brilliantly white cloud. He is flanked by Moses and Elijah, both holding tablets or books. Peter James and John lie on the ground at Christ feet in various postures of awe, worship, and fear. Off to the left side are two worshipping Saints.

At the transfiguration Christ reveals his divinity in a glorious, irrefutable way. The Biblical account says that Christ's face shone with light. Artists cannot hope to capture the true beauty and awe of Christ transfigured, but they can try to communicate the meaning. The goal is to show Christ, not limited by his human incarnation, but as the divine Son of God.

Raphael conveys divinity by positioning Christ hovering in the sky, a detail not mentioned in the gospels. Additionally, the exceptional brilliance of the light is revealed by the disciples shielding their eyes. In reality Christ's face is not shining with light, yet Raphael brilliantly imparts the message that Christ is divine with other visual cues.

Moses and Elijah, venerated prophets, look to Christ, emphasizing His supremacy. They, too, float above the ground. In their case, rather than revealing divinity, their position informs the viewer that they are visitors from heaven who have come to witness to Christ's true nature.

The two saints are commonly understood to be Justus and Pastor, saints that were patrons of the Medici's and the Cathedral the painting was commissioned for. Additionally, both of these saints share their feast day with the Feast of the Transfiguration.

The disciples are literally meant to represent James, Peter, and John. James is on the left, Peter close to him, and John on the right. Metaphorically, the disciples are thought to represent faith, hope, and love. Renaissance iconography typically used the color green to signify faith, yellow or gold to indicate hope, and red, love. Red is also typically used to emphasize blood and Christ sacrifice, and since Christ is the embodiment of sacrificial love the twin themes of love and sacrifice are combined in the one color.

Christ is traditionally painted in red and blue (blue indicating the heavens, or divinity) when the portrayal is of Christ time on the earth. White robes are often used to portray the risen Christ. Here at the transfiguration we have a foreshadowing of Christ's resurrection.

Some have commented that the edge of the mountain on which Christ and the disciples have gathered resembles a cave or burial chamber again hinting at his future death.

The bottom register tells a connected story. While Christ, Peter, James, and John were up on the mountain, the other disciples were approached by a distraught family whose son is possessed by an evil spirit. The disciples were unable to help the boy.

The 9 disciples form a group on the left of the painting. Pointing fingers and highlighted arms are always clues and we need to pay attention to them. While the disciples would not have had any idea the



transfiguration was occurring, in this painting we have two disciples pointing up, directing our eye to Christ.

This is just one way that Raphael has united the two registers and the two stories. The pointing indicates that the power and authority to heal the boy will come from Christ, in particular from the authority Christ holds as the divine Son of God.

Another disciple points directly at the distressed boy bringing our eye back to the immediate story. Three disciples have their palms raised directly toward us, including us in an odd way. It's as if they know they have others viewing, but are holding us off, saying, 'Wait a moment.'

The disciple at the bottom is believed to be Matthew, who is consulting a book, hoping for some information that will assist the disciples in healing the boy.

The group at the right of the painting are the demon possessed boy and his family. The parents are painted in green, perhaps to indicate their faith as they bring their son to the disciples. The figure in red, behind the father, again raises an arm in supplication, but the positioning again draws our eye up to Christ, the source of their hope.

The boy is presented in a twisted, contorted pose with one arm up and one arm down, drawing a straight line through the painting. The child is caught in the battle between kingdoms of the earth and of heaven. He represents all of us who are trapped and lost, but who still raise one arm to heaven seeking release.

The woman in the front with her back to us is not a part of either group. When a figure turns their back to the viewer of a painting it is an invitation to insert ourselves, and to view the story from their perspective. In this case Raphael has actually left a spot next to the woman for us to come, kneel, and watch.

This woman is Faith. She is the key and what unites the three groups: those on the mountain, the disciples, and the boy's family. Faith is what pulls the two registers of the painting together, creating a unified message.



The Contemplation

The Transfiguration is a Prefiguration

Some events prefigure others, like the foreshadowing in movies. The transfiguration prefigures both Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension.

In Raphael's painting we see a glorified Christ, a depiction that is familiar to anyone who has viewed Resurrection or Ascension paintings. We could, quite easily, pull this image of Jesus out of this painting and place it into a resurrection or ascension work without making a change. Raphael has pulled the image of the risen Christ out of the artistic traditions of the church and used it as the model for this transfiguration work.

Quite literally, in this visual work, the form of Christ transfigured is a preview of Christ resurrected. Additionally, the figure of Christ rising from the earth prefigures Christ's ascension. Art demonstrates in a real, physical way, just how clearly the Transfiguration is a prefiguring of Christ's Resurrection.

At this point in the gospel narrative, Jesus begins to reveal the plot line that leads him to the cross and grave, and as he does, he wants the disciples to be assured in their coming faith journey of his final victory.

As the disciples have journeyed north, they have been watching Christ perform healings and miracles, and have had moments of clarity about who Jesus is. These moments appear to be fleeting as if they glimpse Christ's true nature, and then revert back to perceiving Jesus as their teacher. It's a hard transition, to truly accept the fullness of who Jesus is. However, over the time they have traveled up through Israel their eyes have slowly been opened.

The Transfiguration is the turning point in the disciples' journey with Jesus. Here Christ clearly reveals who he is. Peter, James and John have seen Jesus in a glorified state and heard God's voice declare that he is his beloved son. It is against the backdrop of these revelations that Jesus immediately begins to speak of his coming death, preparing the disciples for what is to come.

From this point on, Jesus will begin to travel south to Jerusalem and toward his crucifixion. In this short time, Jesus will need to prepare his disciples for the work he leaves them to do, a greater work.

This is also why the stories of the Transfiguration and the disciple's inability to cast out the demon are important to link together. They form the full measure of the imagery necessary to see the prefigurement.



The Healing of the Demon Possessed Boy is Prefiguration

Two of the main figures in the painting are Moses and Elijah. And they both point to an important theme in the story/painting. The Transfiguration points to what Luke calls here Jesus's "departure" (literally "exodus" in Luke 9:31). This is a reference to when he ascends to be with the Father.

This intentional use of the word 'exodus' used in Luke 9:31 links the transfiguration with Moses. Jesus will be leaving this world soon and will be returning to the Father. The connection to Moses' world is also strengthened when you see that the last days of Jesus coincide with Passover. So, just as the Exodus in Moses's day is linked with Passover, so the Ascension of Jesus to the Father is linked with Passover.

Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, again foreshadowing the Ascension of Jesus, when he is taken up in the clouds to return to the Father. The Ascension teaches us that the work of Christ is finished, and he ascends to the Father where he receives the kingdom and authority.

The only problem with this narrative is what we see at the bottom of this painting: when Jesus leaves, the disciples are alone to battle the devil and his work. They appear to be doing a horrible job of it. In the bottom frame of the painting, the disciples are painted in stark contrast to the risen and ascended Jesus. They appear confused, disorganized, and a bit desperate. They cannot cast the demon out. Jesus has to do it for them.

In the gospel of John we are told: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. The promise that is latent here in these events is that the disciples will get better at this, and they will have to, Jesus is departing.

For Luke, the Transfiguration, followed by the healing of the demoniac, frames the foundation for the book of Acts and the empowerment of the disciples with the gift of the Holy Spirit. (see Luke 24:49, Acts 1:4, 5). What appears dismal here, the disciple's inability to heal the boy, will soon turn into something spectacular. If you keep reading in Luke 10, we see a different story, the 70 disciples sent out in pairs and report to Jesus: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name."

The Transfiguration where Jesus withdraws from the disciples, the disciple's failure with the demonic boy, followed by the success of the disciples in the next chapter prefigures the events of the Ascension and Christ returning to the Father.

The Ascension is about the victory of the risen Christ over the devil. He defeats him on the cross, and he now sends his disciples out with authority to spread the gospel and liberate mankind from the clutches of the evil one.

In the painting, we see a stark division between the realm and power of heaven in the transfiguration frame, and the realm and power of the devil and death in the bottom frame. These two realms will be



joined with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the work of the church. In the kingdom age, the two kingdoms are united. The disciples will receive the power to cast out demons, and to do greater works than even Jesus himself, when they experience the filling of the Spirit.

The Transfiguration as Transformation

The final figure in this painting that we should pay attention to is the woman in pink and blue kneeling at the bottom of the painting. She is faith. In Luke's account Jesus reprimands his disciples as "unbelieving." In Mark, Jesus tells the father of the possessed boy, that all things are possible to him who believes, and he tells the disciples that this kind (of demon) cannot come out by anything but prayer.

This twofold admonition/instruction, faith and prayer, gives us the keys for our own transformation. When we believe in the risen and ascended Jesus, we pursue a life characterized by faith and prayer. A dependence upon the power and presence of God, in and through us, gives us the power to transform lives.

The combination of these two stories serves as a contrast for the disciples that they are to remember later. When they are on their own, the example of Jesus, and the emphasis on faith and prayer as the vehicles of power, will be powerful reminders and indicators of how they are to manage their lives and ministries.

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