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Have you ever had an experience that transformed your understanding of the world, that changed how you look at things or impacted your faith? Back in the 1990s I heard about the discovery of planets circling distant stars, the first evidence that planets existed beyond our own solar system. This news transformed our understanding of the universe and our place in it, for soon we began hearing that some of those planets existed in a habitable zone where life could be possible. This area was called the Goldilocks zone, where it wasn't too hot or too cold, but just right, where water could exist to sustain life.

Did you hear the big news this week? Astronomers announced the discovery of a star only 40 light years away from us that includes seven Earth-size planets, with at least three of them in the zone that could possibly have water. The planets are so close to one another that if you looked up into the night sky from the surface of one planet you could see other planets in the night sky, as large as our own full Moon appears to us.

Wouldn't that be an amazing place to visit, with a transformed night sky that looks so different from our

own experience? Imagine what it would be like if astronomers discover the existence of an atmosphere on one of those planets, or detect signs of life. That news would certainly transform our understanding of the universe!

Peter, James, and John had their view of the world transformed in a similar way—not because of the discovery of planets orbiting a nearby star, but because of their experience on the top of a mountain. A week before their trip to the mountain Jesus explained how he would suffer and be killed, how those who followed him would suffer and possibly die as well. I imagine the talk discouraged Jesus' followers, made them think twice about following this radical teacher.

They gathered on the mountain for prayer, a chance to get away from the crowds and reflect—when suddenly the face of Jesus was transformed and his clothes were brilliant white. Two other people seemed to appear—Moses and Elijah who had been dead for over a thousand years. They discussed how Jesus would exit Jerusalem once he arrived there. The narrator, Luke, then explains that:

Peter and those with him were slumped over in sleep. When they came to, rubbing their eyes, they saw Jesus in his glory and the two men standing with him. When Moses and Elijah had left, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He blurted this out without thinking.

While he was babbling on like this, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them. As they found themselves buried in the cloud, they became deeply aware of God. Then there was a voice out of the cloud: “This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him.” (9:32-35 *The Message*)

Just imagine how their view of Jesus was transformed—from the conversation a week before about suffering and death to this glowing encounter with heroes of the past. Their view of Jesus as a great teacher may have transformed into a view of Jesus as otherworldly. This sounds like an amazing and transforming experience, but doesn’t it sound...well...a bit far-fetched? I mean, when’s the last time you had such a vision? I haven’t.

One writer ponders the same question as he commented, “For modern readers, the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is one of the most difficult in the New Testament. It has the form of a historical narrative, but its content is so otherworldly that it is hard for us to accept its historicity.”<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars suggest that the vision was in a dream-like state of being, for did you notice how Luke noted that the three disciples had been sound asleep? But if dreaming, I wonder how all three of them could experience the same vision? One commentary suggests that “Whether we reject the story as the product of pious imagination or...accept all its details as historical, the fact remains that the story points us to mystery.”<sup>2</sup>

Most of us today are a bit squeamish about mystery. We like to know what’s going on. We want solid evidence, proof, and logical explanations. When I watch a magician doing an amazing trick, for example, I often want to know how the mysterious trick happened, as was the case with:

a brilliant magician performing on an ocean liner. Every time he did a trick, the Captain's parrot

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would yell, “It’s a trick. He’s a phony. That’s not magic.” Then one evening during a storm, the ship sank while the magician was performing. The parrot and the magician ended up in the same lifeboat. For several days they just glared at each other, neither saying a word to the other. Finally the parrot said, “OK, I give up. What did you do with the ship?”<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to mystery...well...it’s the mysterious part that makes us uncertain—and we like to be certain. With uncertainty comes the possibility of change, and often we like things to continue without change.

I often wonder if the idea of change is what troubles us about this story of Jesus on the mountain, for some English translations use the word *transfigure* to describe what happened to Jesus, while others use the word *change*. The Greek word describing the event is *metamorphoó*, from which we get the English word *metamorphosis*, meaning to change or transform or transfigure. Often we think about this story in terms of how Jesus was changed, but I wonder if it could also be a story about how the three

disciples changed—or for that matter, how we could change.

Making changes in one’s personal life is not always easy to do, is it? We get so used to the patterns that have etched their way into our lives that moving us in another direction can be...well...quite difficult. Think of the last time you wanted to change something about your life, to transform bad habits, to create new opportunities for your future.

The season of Lent, which begins this week on Ash Wednesday, provides an opportunity for change during the forty days approaching Easter. Oftentimes we’re encouraged to give up something, but it’s also an opportunity to take on something new, such as being kinder or more loving. One church focused on this idea during Lent with the theme, “Forty Days of Love.”

Each week members of the congregation were encouraged to show their love and appreciation in different ways. The first week they were encouraged to send notes to people who had made positive contributions to their lives.

After the first service a man in the congregation wanted to speak to his pastor. The pastor describes the man as “kind of macho, a former football player who loved to hunt and fish, a strong self-made man.” The man told his pastor, “I love you and I love this church, but I’m not going to participate in this Forty Days of Love stuff. It’s OK for some folks,” he said, “but it’s a little too sentimental and syrupy for me.”

A week went by. The next Sunday this man waited after church to see his pastor again. “I want to apologize for what I said last Sunday,” he told him, “about the Forty Days of Love. I realized on Wednesday that I was wrong.”

“Wednesday?” his pastor repeated. “What happened on Wednesday?”

“I got one of those letters!” the man said. The letter came as a total surprise. It was from a

person the man never expected to hear from. It touched him so deeply he now carries it around in his pocket all the time. “Every time I read it,” he said, “I get tears in my eyes.” It was a transforming moment in this man’s life. Suddenly he realized he was loved by others in the church. This changed his entire outlook. “I was so moved by that letter,” he said, “I sat down and wrote ten letters myself.”

Receiving that letter was a transforming experience... It came from a mailbox rather than a mountaintop, but the effect was the same—his perspective was changed.<sup>4</sup>

During Lent this year I suggest that we also strive to demonstrate our love for one another. Be transformed. Write letters. Offer kind words. For forty days, reflect God’s transforming light by letting others know you love them.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, 1993, 198.

<sup>2</sup> Hare, 198.

<sup>3</sup> Sermons.com

<sup>4</sup> King Duncan, Collected Sermons, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)