

# Transfiguration Sunday

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## Introduction

Epiphany is over and Lent not quite begun, so as we approach the Gospel reading today we are in something of a 'space between'. In a similar way, right at the heart of Luke's account of the Transfiguration, we find the disciples also betwixt and between – in their case the heaviness of sleep and an attentive alertness. It is this fulcrum moment which will be our starting point for this reflection.

### Preparation:

Take a large blank sheet and write 'weighed down' at the top. Now spend a few minutes thinking about the phrase and then write down/draw/collage any thoughts or images that come to you in connection with it. Perhaps other words or phrases, a song or piece of music, a painting or other piece of art might suggest themselves to you; or perhaps it might call to mind other bible stories or passages that have a feeling of heaviness about them. Choose just one and spend a few moments reflecting on the imagery evoked.

Alternatively: Find a heavy quilt or blanket and lie down or curl up in a chair under it for a few moments. Take note of any associated sensations or changes in your physical or mental state.

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## Text

### Luke 9:28–36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.

They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to

accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” — not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

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## Comment

Luke packs a lot into this story – a transfiguration, the appearance of two Old Testament giants, a powerful Theophany (with its echo of his Annunciation account), a confirmation of Jesus as chosen by God and, right at the heart of the story, Peter, James, and John battling with the gravitational pull of sleep!

So – a question to begin with. If the disciples had not been present, would the appearance of Jesus’ face have changed, or his clothes become ‘dazzling white’ as he prayed? Was this something that always marked his times of prayer with God, or was it something that happened just on this occasion because of the presence of the disciples?

Of course we don’t know the answer but what we do see is that the change in the appearance of Jesus appears to have dragged the disciples out of the arms of Morpheus and into a state of alertness that enabled them to enter into the Theophanic moment which followed shortly after. The sense of this is slightly blunted in the NRSV’s rendition of the key phrase in v.30 as ‘*but since they had remained awake*’. However other translations – for example David Bentley Hart’s\* new literal translation of the New Testament with its

*And Peter and those with him were weighed down by sleep; but waking thoroughly they saw the glory of him and of the two men standing with him*

capture much more clearly the sense of the disciples moving from one state to another, and of the consequences of this. The Greek *diagorantes* (from *diagoreō*) only occurs in this verse and has two elements – *goreō* – to awaken (which itself has roots in a verb suggesting the gathering up and focusing of one’s scattered thoughts or unconscious attentions), and the intensifier *dia* (properly, thoroughly, fully) – a conjunction which emphatically expresses the transition from heavy sleepiness to full alertness.

We tend to associate the phrase ‘weighed down’ with words such as ‘care’, ‘grief’, ‘sorrow’, ‘worry’, ‘anxiety’, ‘work’ etc i.e as a rather negative state which we want to escape from. However ‘weighed down with sleep’ is generally a rather more pleasant place to be – a sensation we can perhaps also capture when we snuggle up under a heavy coverlet or blanket. Our heart rate and breathing slow, our sympathetic nervous system begins to damp down, our attentiveness diminishes, our eyes and limbs grow heavy and we enter a warm comfortable state where the possibility of thought and action dwindles and from which we do not wish to be disturbed – the gravitational pull of sleep is a very strong one! This is where Peter, James, and John were as Jesus prayed and conversed with Elijah and Moses – and we can perhaps imagine their initial annoyance and resentment as the light coming from Jesus’ face and clothes intrudes on this heavy languor.

But what, if anything, has any of this to do with our approaches to understanding conflict and our responses to it? Well, it might be that sometimes there are things in our thought patterns or behaviour – preoccupations, preconceptions, prejudices – which have the same effect as the blanket of impending sleep. Things which keep us feeling warm and safe, or which dull our thinking or perception, or make us unwilling to initiate action for fear of it dragging us up out of comfort and ease. The disciples are faced with a choice – to forgo the cocooning comfort of sleep and let themselves be pulled back to full wakefulness, or to clutch its warmth closer, close their eyes more tightly and roll over the other way. The text makes it clear that it is only in battling with the latter and struggling towards the former that they reach a state where they can enter a different place in which they see and hear things which will (even if not immediately) change their understanding and shape their future choices and actions. The same choice may well face us in situations of conflict – will we clutch onto and pull round ourselves things which give us comfort and security but which anchor us to inertia, or will we make the effort to put ourselves in a different place where we might gain new understanding or see new courses of action open up?

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## Response

Think about a past or current situation of conflict (small or large; public or private) in your life, work, or church situation.

What attitudes, understandings, or narratives are part of how you see this? Are there any of these which make you feel comfortable and safe but which could be holding you back from seeing or acting differently? If so then reflect further on what you might do about these to lessen their retarding weight on you. Can you identify a series of small steps which could help you towards that end?

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## Prayer

Jesus  
When we risk missing a moment of transformation  
May the light of your face  
wake us out of slumber

When we are tempted to sink deeper into inertia  
May the light of your face  
call us back to liveliness

When we long to cling to comfort and security  
May the light of your face  
draw us up into bravery

When we simply want to turn away  
may the light of your face  
capture and hold our gaze...

so that we may see more clearly  
who and what we should be and become,  
and the paths which you are asking us to find and follow.  
Amen.