



“Peeling Dragon Skin”

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Luke 9:28-43a

I recently read a report that showed reading out loud to your children every day helps produce the right habits and behaviors, leading to healthier, kinder, and smarter children. I mean, that should, right there, be enough evidence to push me to read to my girls every day. But I am a little more selfish about it. I read to my daughters every day because secretly I love it. I don't know if you feel the same way as I do, but reading to my children every night before they go to bed is the most powerful moment of connection I have with them. They snuggle up next to me, read over my shoulder, ask me questions, and beg me to read yet another chapter. I've read to my girls every night in some way or another since the moment they were born.

Now that they're older, we are diving into more difficult books, ones that are a little bit more complex in plot. We have been working our way every evening through the Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis. Friends, let me tell you, these books are magical. They are full of spiritual images, fantastic characters, and inspiring adventures. I know that our Pastor Emeritus, Ray Vickrey, used to quote the Chronicles of Narnia often in his sermons and now I understand why. These stories, through action and adventure, reveal characters who are on unique journeys of faith. And my daughters seem to be enjoying that journey with Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy Pevensie... and of course, the central Christ-character, Aslan, the Lion.

We have already made our way through the first two books in the series, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*, and we are now most of the way through the third book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. We recently came to the part of the book where a main character, Eustace, the cousin of the Pevensie children, went through a powerful journey of transformation and regeneration. And this story reminded me of what it means to be transfigured and changed.

To give you some background to the story, Eustace is the character that you might enjoy hating – he was selfish, greedy, whiney, spoiled, and complained constantly. Eustace ended up in Narnia with his cousins Lucy and Edmund, who had been to Narnia before, and was taken aboard a ship, The Dawn Treader. On this ship Prince Caspian and the crew were searching for seven lost Narnian knights. So, the ship stopped at several islands, on one of which Eustace got himself lost. He wandered away from the shoreline where the crew was camping and happened upon a cave, where he witnessed the death of a dragon. When he was sure the dragon was dead, he entered the cave and discovered that it was filled to the ceiling with treasure. Eustace began loading his pockets with gold and diamonds, hoping to be rich. But the selfish boy was so tired that he ended up falling asleep on the hill of treasure. When he awoke, he found that he, himself, had turned into a dragon. He was miserable and lonely and afraid. After a while, he finally succeeded in communicating to his ship-mates what had happened to him, coming to the realization that he had been a horrible person and was probably stuck as a dragon forever.

It was here that the Christ-character, Aslan, entered the narrative in order to help Eustace. Eustace then followed Aslan to a deep and bubbling well of water with marble steps going down into it. And here is the rest of the story according to Eustace:

“The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. Mind you, I don’t know if he said any words out loud or not. I was just going to say that I couldn’t undress because I hadn’t any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. Oh, of course, thought I, that’s what the lion means. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I was a banana. In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to get down into the well for my bathe.

But just as I was going to put my feet into the water I looked down and saw that they were all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as they had been before. Oh, that’s all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I’ll have to get out of it too. So I scratched and tore again and this underskin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bathe.

Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.

The lion said - but I don’t know if it spoke – ‘You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know - if you’ve ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away.

Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off - just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt - and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me - I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on - and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again. You’d think me simply phoney if I told you how I felt about my own arms. I know they’ve no muscle and are pretty mouldy compared with Caspian’s, but I was so glad to see them.

After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me - (with his paws?) - Well, I don't exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes - the same I've got on now, as a matter of fact. And then suddenly I was back here. Which is what makes me think it must have been a dream."

We've been in the Gospel of Luke on Wednesday evenings and on Sunday mornings since the beginning of the year and up until this point of transfiguration, we've discovered a lot about Jesus's identity, who he was and what he preached and who he came to save from the awful pain in themselves and in the world. And this moment of transfiguration on the mountain was the pinnacle moment where the disciples figured out who Jesus was and his unique mission in the world. And as we heard in the Gospel Lesson, Jesus was transfigured, his greatness was made apparent, and after coming down the mountain his followers couldn't accomplish anything without the transformative power of Jesus helping them.

Then, after the Transfiguration, for the next ten chapters of Luke, Jesus was on his journey to Jerusalem. It would be a long a torturous journey to the cross. And Jesus needed to be transformed to bear the weight of the pain and suffering he would have to endure. At the transfiguration, Jesus needed to rip off the doubt and fear about his future crucifixion and go down from the mountain into his greatness and into his glory. In the face of the cross, the face of Jesus was changed. And the words of God were ringing in Jesus' ears, "You are beloved. You are my chosen one. You are no longer a hindered by the dragon skin and scales of doubt and despair. You are free. You are free to love and be loved. You are free to hope and bring hope. You are free to be joyful and bring joy. You are free of what is weighing you down."

But we also see that each Gospel writer, including Luke, followed the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus with another story, the story of a boy who was desperately sick, so sick that not even the disciples could cure him. It seemed that the Gospel writers were telling us that these two stories, these two experiences belong together: the mountaintop experience and the shrieking, stubborn demon – the glory and the suffering; the rough dragon scales and the raw newborn skin. This is life. As we seek to lean into the fulfilling bread and the richness of the cup, we are also reminded of the broken body and the spilling of blood. The transformed Jesus was also the suffering Christ. As Jesus returned to his old self after going down the mountain, we too must live with the understanding that our dragon self, as well as our stripped down and holy self, will always be a part of us. Glory and suffering reside together. The glory of God's presence and the pain of a broken world cannot easily be separated.

But I think telling the story of a transfigured Messiah is important because when we seek after a God who loves deeply, the divine spirit glows within us. We need to understand that the power of Christ's love strips away our insecurities, our complacency, and our hopelessness so that we might realize that we are beloved and that we all have a purpose in healing the world. And sure, it will be painful when Jesus strips away the dragon scales. Sure, it will be painful when the claws of the divine transform us scale by scale, day by day, hurt by hurt into people of compassion and strength. Jesus' transfiguration prepared him for the cross. And our own transformations have prepared us to bring love into the world, to bring life where there was once

death. Transformation, acknowledging that we are loved and that everyone is loved, helps us lead people through their pain, helps us save ourselves and save others.

I know that you might think you are beyond saving – that you have hurt too many people, that you have made bad choices, that you haven't been as loving, understanding, or accepting as you should have been. The scales and rough skin of fear and failure feel like they wrap around you so tightly that you wonder if the true you, the real you, can ever emerge from the cocoon of deception and false joy. I know that you might think you will be a dragon forever, breathing the fire of negativity and living the isolation of loneliness. The skin of your old self feels as if it is suffocating the breath of God within you.

I know that you also feel like the world is beyond saving. Disasters persist. Brokenness is common. Injustices threaten the vulnerable. Illness decreases our energy and patience. We don't know how to transform, to change, to transfigure this world and ourselves in order to bring hope to hurting people. We don't know how to tear off the rigid and rough dragon skin that keeps us from living into the freedom of community, of relationship, of love, and of joy.

And that is why it is important for me to preach about resurrection every year at Easter. Because we are Easter people! It is important for me to preach about the transfiguration of Christ every year, the time when Jesus took his followers up a mountain, up closer to the realm of God, where things are more real and more raw. For we are transformed people! To be transformed, Easter people we need a transfigured Jesus in our lives to show us we are more than our peeled dragon skin. We are aglow with the holiness, the love, and the power of the divine. We need the claws of Aslan to strip us bare. We need the words of God to speak into our hearts that we are all indeed closer to God and deeply loved by the God of all.

We need God to continue to transfigure us day after day, to peel off the dragon skins that tell us we are worthless, or useless, or tired, or depressed, or unloved, or a nobody. Because you are not! I see you under that dragon skin. I see you aglow with the purpose, and the power, and the love of God. God sees you as bright and beloved. I see you as bright and beloved. And the whole world needs to see you as bright and beloved. So, peel of that dragon skin and be transformed.

Amen.