

LIVING THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST  
**TRANSFIGURATION**

EASTERN DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA





1

## HOLY MOUNTAIN

The astonishing story of Jesus' Transfiguration is filled with supernatural happenings, otherworldly characters, cosmic apparitions and intrigue. But behind the Gospel's most spectacular "special effects" scene, the mysterious transformation of Jesus at the summit of Mountain Tabor shows us something essential, even down-to-earth, about the Christian faith. And it teaches us how we can—and why we *should*—live that faith today.



St. Mary and the Gospel writers depicted on a priest's ceremonial collar, or *vagas*, 1691.

**THE GOSPEL WRITERS MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE** sketch the tale in just a few tantalizingly brief lines. But the Transfiguration captured the imagination of Christians early on: they recognized that it revealed something critically important about Jesus, and celebrated the Transfiguration as one of the feasts of the church.

In the Armenian Church, this yearly remembrance is known as *Aylagerboutiun*—a reference to the “otherly form” of the Lord. It proved so popular that it dislodged an older pagan feast called *Vartavar*, and that name is still commonly used to refer to the Feast of the Transfiguration. The redeemed, Christian *Vartavar* is one of the

Armenian Church's five major holy days, or “tabernacle feasts”—standing alongside Christmas and Easter, Assumption and Exaltation, as the main “guide-posts” in our journey through the year.

Generations of Armenian Church fathers have reflected on the Transfiguration in profound, revealing homilies. Medieval artists used all their ingenuity to depict the surreal scene on Mount Tabor. The church's *sharagans* (hymns) probe its theological meaning in music and poetry. All of these treasures are gifts from our ancestors, guiding us on our spiritual journey today; encouraging us onward as we live the Gospel of Christ.



## Who is Jesus?

Jesus' transfiguration came fairly late in his ministry; it is recounted toward the end of the Gospels of Matthew (17:1-9), Mark (9:1-8), and Luke (9:27-36). In fact, it could be said that the Transfiguration was the "beginning of the end" of Jesus' earthly life. Shortly before his mountaintop transformation, Jesus told his disciples plainly, for the first time, that it would be necessary for him to suffer and die, but that he would rise again to new life on the third day. Only at this point—and *after* Jesus had performed his dramatic miracles, like healing the blind and the possessed, walking on water, and raising the dead—did Jesus consider the time right to disclose God's mysterious plan for him to his closest followers.

The spur to this revelation was Peter's response to a question Jesus had posed to his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" Without missing a beat, the fiery Peter spoke up: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus praised Peter for his faithful profession, but also went on to reveal the dark path that would lead to his resurrection: "From that time on," says the gospel, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering; that he would be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matthew 16:21).

Yet on hearing this, Peter quickly backtracked on his profession of faith. "God forbid it!" he gasped. Overwhelmed by Jesus' morbid prediction of his own suffering and death, Peter had forgotten the most important part of the story: the promise of Christ's resurrection. Peter's faith, it turned out, was only skin-deep.

## Cosmic Forces; a Gentle Voice

This exchange provides the background to the Transfiguration. Jesus invited his closest friends, Peter and the brothers James and John, to climb a high mountain to pray. None of the Gospels gives us the name of the mountain, but tradition identifies it with Mount Tabor, located west of the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly, Jesus' appearance dramatically changed. His face gleamed like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white—whiter than any bleach could bleach them; as white as a flash of lightning. Just then, as if walking out of the mists of time, two heroes of the Old Testament appeared: Moses and Elijah. They stood at Jesus' side talking with him.

Peter, inspired once again by the moment, called out to Jesus: "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But suddenly, while he was still speaking, a bright cloud appeared and covered them all, and a voice spoke from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

The disciples were terrified. They fell down and buried their faces in the ground. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Do not fear." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."





**MOVIE:** What the disciples saw on Mount Tabor

## Journey Up the Mountain

Peter, James, and John—the men Jesus took with him to pray on Mount Tabor—were his three closest friends among the disciples. These were the same ones he had personally called to accompany him when he raised a dead girl to life (Mark 5:37-40). These were the same who were with him in his final hours in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). These three, the most intent of the Twelve on fellowship with Jesus, were granted rare insights: his power to vanquish death; his majestic glory as he stood with Moses and Elijah; his passion as he prayed before his arrest.

And he led them up on a mountain hike. Mountains, in all their imposing majesty, have always been associated with sacredness: from the pagan pantheon of Greek mythology on Mount Olympus to Mount Sinai, where God issued the Ten Commandments to Moses; to Mount Zion, conquered by the great King David and home to Solomon's temple. The emotional attachment of Armenians to Mount Ararat is no different: here is another biblical mountain, the place of God's first great



act of compassion toward fallen humanity, the resting place of Noah's Ark and the eternal symbol of God's promise never again to punish the world through a flood.

Though Jesus' disciples had been eye-witnesses to his miracles and authoritative teaching, he required his closest disciples to walk farther with him—indeed, to *climb a mountain* with him—in order to catch a more vivid glimpse of his divine authority, and to better understand God's mysterious, loving will for humankind.

## Heroes Out of History

When Jesus was engulfed and transfigured in dazzling light, Moses and Elijah appeared at his side. It's an incredible statement, and yet the gospel writers all state it plainly. Are we meant to understand these heroes from history as spirits or ghosts? Sainly figures descended from heaven? Are they emerging from a science-fictional "time warp"? We can't say; but their presence is surely a miracle. When Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus and speak with him, we recognize Jesus to be the heir and successor to these heroes. Jesus himself had declared: "Do not think



### Why Moses and Elijah?

While the question of *how they got there* may mystify us, the question of *why these two appeared with Jesus*—from among all the figures of the Bible—may have a more straightforward answer.

Moses was the great leader who followed God's command to lead the Israelites out of their enslavement in Egypt and into a Promised Land of their own. It was to Moses that God entrusted the Ten Commandments and the whole complex body of laws regulating every facet of the people's daily life. By strictly adhering to this Law, the Israelites would demonstrate their allegiance to God, day by day.

**continued on page 9**



that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). We might say that at the time of the Transfiguration, “the Law and the Prophets” was thought to be the sum total of God’s will for His creation; and here are the foremost lawgiver and prophet of the Bible, conferring with the Lord. So in this vivid image, we see that the story of the Bible leads inevitably up to Jesus.

On Mount Tabor, God shows us that the ultimate expression of God’s will for us is *not* a code of rules to be followed, or a book to be read and mastered, but a *person to be known and cherished*: Jesus Christ, bathed in divine light.

## The Cloud Speaks!

What follows is easily the strangest image in the story of the Transfiguration: the cloud of God. But it was hardly the first time in biblical history that God enveloped human beings in a mysterious, divine shroud. After Moses led the Hebrew people miraculously across the Red Sea out of Egypt, they wandered for forty years in the Sinai desert. God led them and defended them in battle not in any human likeness, but in a cloud-like form. From within that cloud, God *spoke* to Moses, revealing God’s will for the people. And God spoke again from a cloud on that day on Mount Tabor—this time to all humanity.


From the heavens, God declared that this man who spoke so wisely and powerfully, whose faith had the power to heal men and women, and even to raise the dead—this preacher from Galilee was not merely a messenger or a prophet, *but God’s very own*

## Can You “Capture” God?

As usual, when Peter sees this spectacle his instinct is honest and wholesome, but his actions fall woefully short. He senses immediately that he and the brothers James and John are in the presence not just of their close friend, but of almighty God. Peter recognizes that he is on holy ground. He feels the security of being protected by the ultimate power of the universe. His fears and doubts melt; he senses that his life has attained its end goal. He is filled with bliss—and rightly so.

However, his idea to put up “shelters” shows that he’s missing the point of the Transfiguration. Peter wanted to establish a tent city on the mountaintop so that he could capture that moment in the company of Jesus and the great heroes of the Jewish faith. He wanted to make Mount Tabor the *permanent home* of God.

*But the Kingdom of God is not confined to a place.* God’s grace cannot be contained, bottled, or enclosed within human boundaries. It is communicated to us by means of God’s Son, Jesus. When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, he answered: “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20-21). ■



*“Beloved Son.”* And as a consequence, to know God’s will, to be counted among his beloved children, requires just one thing from us: It requires us simply to “Listen to him” (Matthew 17:5).

The greatest hope a human being can have—enshrined in countless Armenian prayers, beginning with the prayer of baptism, and repeated in countless Armenian *sharagans*—is that each one of us might also hear the Father’s voice saying to us: “Behold my beloved child.”

## Holy Fear

At this point, Peter, James and John fell on their faces in terror—and understandably so. Peter’s earlier profession of faith that Jesus was “the Christ, the son of the living God” was exactly right, but in a way that truly staggers the imagination! It turns out that the man who had lived side-by-side with Peter and the others was not just their companion and friend, but the one “through whom all things were created, in heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible” (from the Nicene Creed; also see Colossians 1:16).

That reality is *stunning*. All that Jesus had said about God’s Kingdom, so difficult for our human brains to grasp, was confirmed through the Transfiguration. The high moral standard that Jesus had set was now revealed to be the secret truth for all mankind. To follow this teacher was now not simply a matter of personal preference; it was the only path to life. Jesus Christ was shown to be not one religious leader among many, *but the full presence of God himself*.

Why were the disciples gripped with fear? Because “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

Again and again the Armenian *sharagans* remind us of the disciples’ feeling of *awe*—a kind of holy fear—when they witnessed this manifestation of Jesus’ divinity. And it’s the scope of that divinity that is so breathtaking: on the one hand, Jesus is the friend who leads us and illuminates our path, taking away fear and anxiety; on the other hand, he is *also* the final Judge, to whom all creation is accountable. It is Jesus who will decide the eternal fate of every human being. And that is surely an awe-inspiring role.



## Touched by Jesus, Touched by God

On Mount Tabor Jesus is revealed to be God’s beloved Son, sharing in the divine authority and power of the Father—and indeed equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit as one person of the Holy Trinity. “God from God, light from Light, true God from true God,” as the Nicene Creed puts it. And yet from this divine glory, “Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up, and do not be afraid’” (Matthew 17:7).

The heart of our Christian faith is encapsulated in that one gesture, that single phrase.

God sends his Son down from heaven to meet humanity in its hopelessly lost condition: to *touch* us, to remove our fears, to heal us. God’s touch, in Jesus, is eternal and irrevocable. Once God touches humanity, in the person of God’s Son, then we are connected to God’s eternal life, so long as we remain open—that is to say, faithful—to Jesus. This is nothing less than a glimpse into the mystery of the incarnation of the Son. As our Creed reminds us: “For us and for our salvation [he] came down from heaven, took body, became man, was born perfectly of the holy virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit.”

Normally we look to the story of Jesus’ *birth* as the iconic expression of the incarnation of the Son of God. But the reality of Jesus entering our lives with a healing touch is ongoing and eternal. It is illustrated *throughout* the New Testament. And through the eyes of faith, it is perceptible in our own daily lives.

Jesus’ divine light empowers us, in joy and hope, to acknowledge God’s power and love for humanity: in other words, to worship him.

### GALLERY: Biblical mountains



**A view of Mount Tabor.**



Through the Holy Spirit, God “inspires” us, literally “breathes into us,” his infectious love. And touched by that love, generations of Armenians, along with Christians the world over, have instinctively responded with heartfelt worship: our own song of love to almighty God.

## Tell No One

These, then, are the cosmic mysteries we witness in the Transfiguration. We see the Holy Trinity revealed. We draw near to the incarnation of the Son of God. We feel God’s healing presence,

in Jesus. We experience the stirrings of Christian worship. We bear witness, alongside the disciples, to the fullness of Jesus' divine authority to save and to judge.

You can imagine how excited the disciples must have been as they followed Jesus back down the mountain; they must have been bursting to tell about the marvels they had seen. Yet Jesus insists they keep the matter to themselves. Why is that?

Certainly, what happened on Mount Tabor is not a secret. But neither is it a news event to be reported. It's not that people would never understand or believe. But perhaps we should consider, in all humility, whether any teller of stories could ever adequately recount the mysteries of God. God's message to us is not an essay; not a philosophy, not even a theology. God's message is *a person*, Jesus Christ, *who can only be known as a person*. No book—not even the Bible—can fully transmit God's Word. Only the incarnate Son of God himself can “speak” to us the genuine love of God. The Gospel must be seen, experienced—*lived*—through the “eyes of faith.”

Jesus strictly forbade his disciples from talking about what they had witnessed because his goal was, and is, to touch every human being, in a relationship—or better, in a *communion*—of faith.

We come to greater faith in Jesus by serving one another; forgiving one another; loving one another. The church is the divine community of those who have journeyed “up the mountain” with our Lord, to live out their lives in celebration of the Gospel—the Good News—of Jesus Christ.

## Why Moses and Elijah?

Elijah was the iconic prophet whom God appointed to restore the Israelites to the faith of their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; he did this by separating the Hebrew people from the pagan deities that had fatally attracted their devotion. Elijah is one of two human beings in the Bible who were spared death (the other is Enoch, the ancestor of Noah; both deathless figures are named in the Armenian requiem hymn, *Ee vereen Yerusaghem*, or “Heavenly Jerusalem”). At the end of his earthly life God called him to heaven, mysteriously drawing him up in a flaming chariot (2 Kings 2:1-12). The Jewish religion held that Elijah would eventually return to the Earth to announce the arrival of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5). In fact, this is why many of Jesus' countrymen mistakenly thought that he was Elijah come again (Matthew 16:13-14).

The Armenian Church fathers also point out that when Moses and Elijah, of all people in history, appear with Jesus, it shows us that Jesus is the bridge between death and life: Moses died and was buried in a secret place; Elijah never died, but immediately joined God in the Kingdom. “All who believe in me,” says Jesus, “though they die, yet shall they live” (John 11:25). ■





2

## WAYS OF WORSHIP

*“During the entire time our Lord moved about the world, he more than surpassed human beings in humility. But up on the mountain, he surpassed even the angels in his ability to inspire awe.”*

That's how the Armenian Church historian Yeghishe, writing some five centuries after Christ, viewed the Gospel story of the Transfiguration: as a glimpse into the awe-inspiring nature of Christ, which somehow co-existed with the greatest humility ever seen among human beings.





Angels depicted on a priest's ceremonial collar, or *vagas*, 1746.

**YOU MIGHT SAY THAT THE VITAL NERVE OF ARMENIAN CHURCH** theology vibrates with the same idea of opposites being united: of humble surfaces masking glorious realities; of the *merely* human being transformed into the divine. The prominence given to the Feast of the Transfiguration in the Armenian Church—it's one of the five major celebrations of the year—shows how the church conveyed these delicate theological ideas to the broad community of faith.

According to the Armenian calendar, the feast takes place on the 14th Sunday after Easter, and moves in relation to the date of Easter. So while the Byzantine Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches observe Transfiguration on the fixed date of August 6, in the Armenian Church it can fall on any day between June 28 and

August 1. The principal feast day always takes place on a Sunday, but the official observance lasts three days.

It's difficult to say exactly when the church first designated the biblical story of the Transfiguration as a feast day. But important clues can be found in early Christian lectionaries. A lectionary is a collection of Scriptural readings, which have been connected to specific days for the purposes of worship. Ancient lectionaries that have survived into modern times are among our most important resources in understanding how the early church used the Bible in its rituals of worship.

In one such listing—known as the Lectionary of Jerusalem—we find the first mention of a feast called “Transfiguration.” This particular lectionary is believed to reflect Christian liturgical practices in



Jerusalem between the end of the 5th and the end of the 8th centuries—so some kind of feast day centered on the Transfiguration must go back at least that far. In Armenia, the earliest evidence for it comes from the first half of the 7th century, making Armenians among the earliest observers of the feast. (In Byzantine liturgical books, mention of the August 6 feast doesn't appear until the early 8th century.) Armenian lectionaries of the 10th to 12th centuries are our source for descriptions of actual rituals for the feast.

## A Rose by Any Other Name

It is a common belief among scholars that the seasonal placement of the Armenian Christian Feast of the Transfiguration, along with some of its associated customs, were imported from an older, pagan celebration called *Vartavar*. Indeed, the names *Vartavar* and Transfiguration (*Aylagerboutiun*) are used almost interchangeably in the Armenian Church calendar. The regional character of the older observance can be seen in the fact that the Georgian Orthodox Church once celebrated a feast known as *Vardoba-Athenagenoba* around the same time of year—although the Georgian event had no connection to the gospel episode of the Transfiguration.

In pagan times, *Vartavar* was the “festival of roses”—*vart* is the name of the flower in Armenian (and Persian)—associated with the summer activities of the agricultural cycle. Draft animals would have their foreheads adorned with roses as they went about their work in the fields, and athletic competitions of strength, speed, and skill would be held to honor the month of Navasart, ringing in the Armenian New Year. *Vartavar* was also steeped in the familiar pagan

cult of love and death: it was the major midsummer festival of the water-born goddess of love—Aphrodite in Greece, Astghik in Armenia—and her handsome-but-doomed consort, Adonis being one of his many names. To honor the goddess, flocks of her totem bird, the pigeon or dove, were released, and her devotees were showered with water.

Remnants of these practices persist in the Christian customs associated with the Transfiguration. The characteristic Armenian Church ritual has the priest immersing his hand-cross in a basin of water and waving it at the members of the congregation, to sprinkle them with the fluid of life. A less refined custom that involves pouring a pitcher of water over someone (often when they least expect it) is still popular in Armenia, especially in the heat of summer. Releasing doves is another common practice on the Feast of Transfiguration.

Likewise, the Armenian word for “rose” echoes through the Name Day designations for the feast. “Name Day” refers to the Armenian custom of blessing people who have certain names that resonate with a given holy day. In the case of the Transfiguration, the relevant names include Vartkes, Vartavar, Vart, Badrig, Alvart, Zarvart, Loosvart, Nvart, Baydzar, Vartanoosh, Vartiter, Vartouhi, and Varvareh—most of them still popular as given names, which shows how strongly Armenians once embraced the ancient festival of roses.



## Down from Ararat

It would be easy to conclude from such things that the Armenian observance of Transfiguration is merely a pagan feast re-imagined for a Christianized audience. This became a popular opinion among Armenian artists and writers in the 19th and 20th centuries; a 1910 “hymn” by the great poet of the Armenian Genocide, Siamanto, tried to recapture the frenzied rites of worship associated with the cruel goddess of *Vartavar*.

But that easy approach confuses custom or habit—the superficial aspects of ritual practice—with the spiritual content of the feast. And that content, expressed in numerous liturgical prayers and hymns, reveals a deep appreciation of the Christian significance of Transfiguration, as well as a detailed knowledge of the Gospel story. Perhaps the memory of some elder religious festival *did* inform the timing of Transfiguration in the Armenian Church calendar; but it was *the story of Christ’s miraculous appearance*, and its significance for humankind, that fired the poetic imaginations of the Armenian Church faithful.

Consider these snatches of Armenian *sharagans*, which combine vivid poetic imagery with profound theological insight:

*Christ—God!—allow us to stand alongside Peter and the sons of Zebedee, as worthy witnesses of your divinity!*

*Lift us up, Lord, from the physical to the spiritual: higher than Mount Tabor, to the tabernacles of your high-heaven!*

*Though we are mortals meant to perish, grant us this purpose: to fashion a spiritual tent that is worthy of our one, loving Savior. (From the Krisdos Asdvadz hymn)*



## The Prayer of Navasart

Siamanto, the pen name of Atom Yarjanian (1878-1915), was an Armenian intellectual and public figure of international standing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

He is most famous for *Bloody News from My Friend (Garmir loorer paregames)*, a collection of poems chronicling the pain and destruction endured by the persecuted Armenians of Ottoman Turkey. He was murdered by the Ottoman authorities during the Armenian Genocide.

**continued on page 15**



*Today—before your disciples on Mount Tabor, O Christ, you revealed the mystery of your second coming!*

*Today—Moses and Elijah appeared, to testify to the death by which you will redeem the world!*

*[But] Today—sin still shackles your servants' senses. Purify us, Lord; let us see you! Let us hear the Father say: "This is my beloved son." (From the Aysor zkhorhourt hymn)*

These are sentiments worthy of the venerable Yeghishe. In fact, this historian best known as the chronicler of [Armenia's heroic defense of Christianity under St. Vartan](#) was also the author of prayers extolling the mystery of the Transfiguration.

Compared to these actual liturgical practices, the borrowings from pagan religion seem very minor. As a matter of fact, the Armenian Church fathers were well aware that the customs of Transfiguration drew on pre-Christian traditions; but they saw those customs as an inheritance from an *even deeper* period of antiquity: the generation of Noah.

From that perspective, the various rites of water would be seen as customs established by Noah and his sons, to perpetuate the memory of the Great Flood, and God's saving intervention. The loosing of doves would recall the messenger who brought back the first proof that dry land, and a new chance for life, lay ahead.

It is hardly surprising that Armenians, living under the shadow of Mount Ararat, where the Ark had come to rest, would have been drawn to another story about God's holy mountain: mysterious and forbidding, but surmountable with extreme effort; at whose summit lies a secret refuge of security, peace, and salvation for the entire human family. The details from the story of Noah's flood fit neatly

with the themes of Christ's Transfiguration, which have been preserved and elaborated by the Armenian faithful down to the present day.

#### **MOVIE:** Beloved Children of God



**Fr. Daniel Findikyan reflects on God's announcement during the Transfiguration, and what it might mean for the followers of Christ.**

## The Prayer of Navasart

*What follows are excerpts from “The Prayer of Navasart” (1910).*

O Goddess, having washed my soul from enfeebling religions,

I walk to you in grace; my slippers tread in holiness.

Open the marble door to your temple, and let me mark your forehead with blood!

Uncover your altar and grant me the red power of my kingly ancestors...

\*\*\*

Hear me, Rose of Miracles, goddess of the golden feet,

White Bride of the Night, Mistress of the Sun,

And radiant nakedness of Aramazd's Veil:

Let the sun, with a single ray, light your altar again—

I believe in you. Firm on my feet among the hills of Bakrevant,

I—a pagan of long centuries and your arrow-armed son—

As a messenger and supplicant—I grandly approach you...

\*\*\*

From the hills of Bakrevant come the flowers of pagan life:

Sons of the sun, magnificently draped in white;

Trained with bow, spear, and arrow, waiting at the threshold of your sacrificial site:

Let them plunge their swords into the throats of mighty bulls...

Let the solemn flock of turtle-doves take flight toward your statue

From off the shoulders of fecund Armenian brides. Let the water games of the Day of

Roses begin... ■







3

## OUT OF DARKNESS

Throughout this book, we've been led on a journey through the remarkable story of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. We've been led alongside three all-too-human disciples, as they come face-to-face with the mind-boggling nature of the universe. Is there a lesson for us in their experience?



**THAT'S THE QUESTION**—the deep mystery—that the church asks us to ponder through the Feast of the Transfiguration.

Ironically, as strange and unearthly as this story may be, it presents a very familiar situation to us. When the disciples shut their eyes and bury their faces, they're succumbing to a feeling that most people share at some point in their lives. They find themselves in the dark: a darkness of ignorance and confusion.

It's a kind of darkness we might occasionally encounter in church, at worship during the Divine Liturgy. We pray to Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnate Word through whom the *entire universe* was created. As humble human beings, we might naturally wonder, *Where do we fit into all this? Can such a cosmic being really care about creatures as small as us?*

But there is another kind of darkness, which most of us know all too well. For even the happiest life has its share of disappointments, sorrows, and fears. Some things we encounter in life are truly terrifying, and the source of deep and long-lasting pain, both physical and spiritual. Earlier generations of Armenian Christians saw this darkness at first hand, in the form of persecution, discrimination, and genocide.

And our own generation—which can peacefully enjoy electronic wonders like this book—is also painfully aware that the world can be a place of danger and violence, where a life can be altered forever in the blink of an eye.

## **GALLERY:** How Artists Have Imagined the Transfiguration



**This depiction of the Transfiguration appears in the 14th-century Gladzor Gospels.**





This kind of darkness could easily draw a person down into despair. Both the darkness of ignorance and that of fear are sources of much confusion and misery in our world.

How can we respond to this darkness? The Transfiguration gives us a clue.

As they lie on the ground, their bodies trembling, their eyes shut, the disciples feel a gentle touch, and hear a familiar voice: “Rise,” it says, “and have no fear.” They look up, emerging from their own darkness—and what do they behold?

The words in the gospel are wonderful: “When they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one, but only Jesus.”

Perhaps that’s the key to the meaning of the Transfiguration: That what we *really* need to look at, first and foremost, is Jesus Christ. Because he contains all of the cosmic mysteries within himself, Christ is our human point of contact with the gigantic questions about God, Creation, and man’s place in it.





But he is also our fellow human being, who has suffered alongside us, and who understands and feels the pains and sorrows of our lives. Jesus is our familiar doorway onto all these things.

We are like those disciples in the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus has called us to walk with him. Why did he choose us? Where is he taking us? We cannot say for certain. All we know is that he is leading us upward. Our climb will be difficult at times, and it will lead us to a place beyond our everyday lives. Some of the things we see during our climb may seem too enormous, too confusing, too terrifying for us to fully grasp. And our human gestures of piety and reverence, however sincere they may be, will seem inadequate to the things we encounter.

But Jesus Christ did not come among us just to show us how insignificant we are. He came to show us that the infinite God who created the universe, who transcends time and space, is not too big to concern himself with human things.

With his hand on our shoulder, and his voice in our ear saying “have no fear,” Christ has come to lead us out of the darkness.

## MOVIE: The Heart of the Gospel



**Fr. Daniel Findikyan speaks about how the divine light of the Transfiguration illuminates a path to living the Gospel of Christ.**



# LIVING THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST: TRANSFIGURATION

By the order of His Eminence Archbishop Khajag Barsamian, *Primate*

## CONCEPT AND DEVELOPMENT

Karine Abalyan  
Artur Petrosyan  
Christopher Zakian

## WRITERS

Elise Antreassian (Chapter 1)  
Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan (Chapter 1)  
Christopher Zakian (Chapters 1, 2, and 3)

## VOICEOVER/AUDIO

Very Rev. Fr. Mamigon Kiledjian  
Gilda Kupelian  
Khoren Mekanejian  
Christopher Zakian

## VIDEO PRODUCTION

Karine Abalyan  
Artur Petrosyan  
Christopher Zakian

## CONTRIBUTORS

Elise Antreassian  
Nancy Basmajian  
Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan  
Gilda Kupelian  
Khoren Mekanejian  
Jennifer Morris  
Levon Petrosyan

© 2013 Diocese of the Armenian Church of America Eastern | 630 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10016

The Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) was established in 1898 under the authority of the Mother See of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Holy Etchmiadzin. Its headquarters at New York's St. Vartan Cathedral complex is the spiritual and administrative center for more than 60 parishes, located from the eastern seaboard to the Rocky Mountains. Information on the Diocese's history, ongoing ministries, and leadership in the community and broader society can be found on its extensive website—[www.armenianchurch-ed.net](http://www.armenianchurch-ed.net).

## IMAGES

### Cover

“Christ Enthroned” (detail); mosaic at the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey; photograph by Artur Petrosyan

### Chapter 1

Priest’s ceremonial collar; *Treasures of Holy Etchmiadzin* (1984); photograph by Boghos Boghossian

“Moses and Elijah” (detail); mosaic at St. John Armenian Church, Southfield, Mich.; photograph by Artur Petrosyan

“St. Peter” (detail); mosaic at St. John Armenian Church, Southfield, Mich.; photograph by Artur Petrosyan

“Mount Tabor”; photograph by Arman Minasyan

“Temple Mount”; photograph by Arman Minasyan

“Mount of Olives”; photograph by Garo D. Nalbandian

“Mount of Temptation”; photograph by Garo D. Nalbandian

“Greater Masis”; photograph by Artur Petrosyan

“Mount Ararat”; photograph by Sargis Hambardzoumyan

### Chapter 2

Priest’s ceremonial collar; *Treasures of Holy Etchmiadzin* (1984); photograph by Boghos Boghossian

Portrait of Siamanto courtesy of Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center

“Sts. Boghos Bedros Church” in Tomarza, historic Armenia; photograph by Hrair Hawk Khatcherian

### Chapter 3

“The Transfiguration”; Gladzor Gospels (14th c.); *The Armenian Gospels of Gladzor: The Life of Christ Illuminated* (2001)

“Transfiguration” by Alexander Andreevich Ivanov (1824); The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia

“The Transfiguration of Christ”; Gladzor Gospels (14th c.); *Armenian Miniature Paintings* (1990)

“The Transfiguration” by Lilit Amirjanyan; *Armenian Miniatures: Biblical Illuminations* (2007)

“Transfiguration of Christ” by Giovanni Bellini (1480); Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy

“Transfiguration” (1330); *Armenian Miniatures from Isfahan* (1986)

“Transfiguration” (1607); *Armenian Miniatures from Isfahan* (1986)

“Transfiguration” by Fra Angelico (1442), Convento di San Marco, Florence, Italy

“Come unto me” (detail) by Vardkes Soureniantz (1900); *Treasures of Holy Etchmiadzin* (1984)