

The Transfiguration Luke 9: 28-36 (2018)

I'd like to retell today's gospel reading, Luke's account of the transfiguration. Sometimes in the retelling of a familiar story in a new way, we can bring it alive again.

It was not an uncommon thing for Jesus to withdraw from the crowds that followed him to a quiet place to pray. And this time, Jesus has invited James, John and Peter up to the mountain with him. I'd like you to try something with me; let's try and put ourselves on the mountain with them. Consider yourself the fourth one that's been invited. If you like, close your eyes and hear the story anew.

So, it's the end of what been a long day, and Jesus has invited a select group of his disciples to join him in a time of prayer. You're tired, but feel honoured to have been asked, even if it means a trek up the mountain, so of course you go! The higher up you go, the closer to God, right? You get to the top -- it was a climb for sure and you're even more tired now, but you manage to stay awake through the prayers, letting Jesus' voice pull you along, comfortably settling into the sound of his voice, the feeling of his reassuring presence. But, even with eyes closed, you begin to notice that it's getting lighter, not darker as evening draws closer. Well, this is disconcerting! You look up and see Jesus is changing--transforming before your very eyes--an amazing brilliance changes first his face, then his clothing. You look at the others, are they seeing this? From the expressions on their faces, you know they do! What's happening here?! This is awesome, but a bit scary. Jesus is being illuminated; like he's been plugged into a divine electrical system. So bright you want to cover your eyes and don't want to at the same time! Your eyes adjust, and then there is Moses—the giver of the law to the people of Israel, and then Elijah the great prophet who foretold the coming of the Messiah, shining in Jesus light. The three of them simply standing there, having a conversation about when Jesus will leave us. This is incredible! Is this for real, or am I dreaming? Is Jesus our Messiah, the one for whom the people of Israel have been waiting, the one Elijah foretold of, the one who will save us. Then Peter, always the one to put his foot in it, starts babbling away to Jesus “Wow, Lord, this was so awesome we can't forget this has happened. We need to commemorate this, we need to build something to remind us of this experience –let's make three little chapels – one for you, Moses and Elijah, right here on this spot, to help us remember, so we can come back here again.”

And then came the cloud. It came down from the mountain– you know, just like you read about in the scriptures—like the cloud Moses disappeared into when he went

up the mountain to speak to God, and the one that Elijah was lifted up into when he left earth to go to God. And we went from like super brilliance to whiteout! It was scary-- then THE VOICE: "This is my Son, my Chosen one, listen to him." Ok, that did it, no more second thoughts about who Jesus was, for sure he is the Messiah. And then, it's over, Elijah and Moses are gone, the light fades and it's just us with Jesus in his regular every day body.

Jesus drew them into this experience of transformation, his transfiguration, their meeting with his divine aspect. How awesome, in the true sense of the word, how amazing. Were you able to imagine yourself having an experience like that? I think I'd probably be like Peter, babbling away, looking to the future, trying to figure out what to do about the experience, rather than just living in the moment of the experience. The Bible doesn't tell us how James and John respond, besides being terrified. I expect they were maybe rooted to the spot, too scared to do anything. I don't think anyone could go through something like this and not themselves be transformed. Our New Testament reading today is from 2nd Peter, and is an actual letter written to the early Christians recounting the experience of the transfiguration, and through the witnessing of this experience came the clear awareness that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. The disciples were transformed by their experience of this divine encounter. And while our own personal experiences and encounters with the Divine may not be quite as exhilarating or as intense as the happenings on the mountaintop, Jesus still calls all of us to walk along with him.

While most of us, I daresay, probably won't experience anything of the magnitude of this transfiguration experience, many of us have had experiences of God's presence in our lives and in the lives of others. When we choose to walk with Jesus not only will we witness what Jesus is capable of doing, but it will transform us as well. Through Jesus we too can be changed. Jesus does call each of us to our own mountaintop experiences of his presence, each of us in a way we can understand—if we are willing to climb the mountain with him! Today's gospel message clearly tells us that Jesus is the Son of God, through him all things are changed, transformed, transfigured. The light of Christ shines on us, the love of God can envelope us all like a cloud. Sometimes we are very acutely aware that the Spirit of God is present, it's palpable, you can just feel it. Sometimes it's more like a co-incidence—God-incidences I've heard them called. Other times we don't see Jesus in the experience and recognize it for what it truly was until we look back on it, or relive it, talk about it with others.

Jesus is always calling us to a deeper experience of him, just as he called Peter, John and James into his transfiguration. It is our choice, we have been given that free choice, but just because some choose not to come closer to Jesus doesn't mean that God really isn't there! And it's a scary process to get that close to God, or to have God get that close to us. We're a bit like Peter in that way, wanting to commemorate Christ's presence, God's enveloping love with something solid, like a church building so we can come and sit in it and remember and enjoy the experience, relive it in some way. And you know, there's nothing wrong with that! It is good to be here! We need this space, and weekly services to feed us, to support us, to bring us together as a community of Christians. But it's only part of what it means to be faithful followers of Christ; we're called to more than that—as Jesus called Peter James and John—and the other disciples to do more than just relive the experience of his presence with them. We're called to take our transformed selves out of this space, our comfortable 'dwelling place' and go out into the world.

The transfiguration story gives us a glimpse of God's glory, a glimpse of the transformative and amazing power and wonder of God in Christ.

Here's how biblical scholar Karoline Lewis explains it:

The Transfiguration reveals the power of our present because of God's presence in Jesus, but it also points to the potential of our future. That's what Peter could not see. But, we can't blame him or think we could do better. Because, we can't. We constantly and continually try to contain the present. And why? Because we believe, falsely, that the present is that which can be controlled and therefore, our futures as well. And so, our default decisions are likely dependent on the assumption that our lives will willingly bend to our momentary needs and our contextual commitments.

If the Transfiguration is to mean anything for our lives, it simply has to be that which intrudes on our present, changes our present, and contends that we imagine our future in a different kind of way ... a crucifixion way, a resurrection way. Because any revelation of Jesus' teaching, preaching, pastoral care, or, even presence reveals our future and claims our future.¹

We are at critical junction points in our church. The future is uncertain. Do we continue to do what we've always done, or try something new and different? Do we release the control to

¹ Karoline Lewis in Commentary for Transfiguration Sunday 2018. From <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5057> accessed August 2, 2018

God to and allow ourselves to be transformed and live in the light of Christ's transfiguring presence or stay safely behind the walls of this dwelling place, doing what we've always done? Is Jesus calling us to something new and different? I do think so! And while that too can be scary, we know that when we do what Jesus wants us to, even knowing that we're not sure where Christ is leading us, we remain sure in the knowledge that when we've given it over to God, we never walk alone. Amen.

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