

Transfigured
Luke 9:28-45
Exodus 34:29-35

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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(Transfiguration Sunday)

Luke 9:28-45

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.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, ‘Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.’ Jesus answered, ‘You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.’ While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, ‘Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.’ But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

Exodus 34:29-35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them.

Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The transfiguration of Christ is one of those stories that we have all heard. It is in three of the four gospels – only John, the mystic, does not tell this story. We celebrate Transfiguration Sunday every year, on the last Sunday before the start of Lent. And every year we tell this story.

Jesus takes Peter and James and John, his inner circle, and he goes up on the mountain to pray all night. This is not the first time he has done this – he went up on the mountain and prayed all night just before he named the Twelve Apostles and preached the Sermon on the Mount.¹

It is not the first time he has prayed all night on the mountain, but it marks a shift in his ministry. The first time, Jesus was shifting gears from being a wandering rabbi with some disorganized followers into being the leader of a movement. This time, he is shifting gears again.

While he is praying, the three disciples see two men talking with him. They recognize them from the stories they have heard all their lives – these two men are two of the greatest heroes of the Bible. Moses and Elijah.

We remember who Moses was. You know, Charlton Heston played him in the movie *The Ten Commandments*. Moses spoke with God face-to-face on Mount Sinai and brought the people the Law, so that they would know how to live as God's people. He led the people of Israel out of Egypt and to the edge of the Promised Land.

We may not remember Elijah so well. Yes, we know the name, but Elijah was more than a famous name. He never got his epic movie, like Moses did, and it's a shame. It would have been a great action movie. Elijah healed the crippled. He preached God's word. He raised the dead. He called down God's fire from Heaven and he killed the idolatrous priests of Ba'al in combat. He was such a great prophet that God did not even require him to die – he was taken bodily up to Heaven in a whirlwind.

¹ Luke 6:12.

The prophet Malachi says that Elijah will return before the Messiah comes, to call the people to repentance and show them where to find the Messiah.² Even today, at the Passover feast, a chair is left vacant for Elijah every year, because the Jewish people are waiting. As Christians, we believe that the role of Elijah was played by John the Baptist. John did, indeed, call the people to repentance and show them where to find the Messiah. The Biblical description of John's unusual camel-hair clothing and his all-natural locust and wild-honey diet are subtle references to John being Elijah.³

Moses and Elijah are speaking with Jesus about his upcoming "departure," meaning his death. Jesus knows what's going to happen. Moses and Elijah know what's going to happen. The disciples do not know what's going to happen, but that is not because Jesus does not tell them.

Right now, at this moment, Jesus is transfigured. His appearance changes. His clothes become dazzling white. He looks less like the wandering rabbi and more like what he is – God's anointed one, the Messiah.

Jesus is not really changed, so much as revealed. Peter and James and John are seeing the Messiah who has always been there, without all the normal mundane worldly stuff getting in the way. Jesus, too, sees the Messiah who has always been there, without the normal mundane worldly stuff getting in the way. Jesus sees that it is time for his ministry on earth to shift gears.

Peter speaks up, as he usually does, and says 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." He wants to build buildings, turn this into a church complex, or maybe a retreat center. He wants to

² Malachi 4:5-6.

³ Mark 1: 6.

commemorate this event, and make this mountain into a place of pilgrimage, a place where other people come to see God, since he and his friends have seen God there.

But that is not what Jesus is looking to do here. He is shifting gears, true, but he is not shifting into a building phase. Jesus never built a single building. All the Church buildings in the world, from the humblest storefront chapel on Skid Row to Saint Peter's Basilica, are tools for ministry, not ministry goals in and of themselves.

Just then, a cloud rolls in, and a voice comes out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

This is the second time a voice from Heaven has spoken about Jesus. The first was at his Baptism.⁴ This time the voice of God not only identifies Jesus, but tells the disciples to listen to him.

The next day, when Jesus and Peter, James, and John come down the mountain, they are met with a crowd and a problem. At times like this, it is easy to understand why Jesus goes away to pray – otherwise, he gets no peace. The disciples who had remained at the bottom of the mountain had, it seems, been unable to heal a young man who had seizures.

Jesus heals the young man, but not without complaint. Yes, Jesus complains. This is rare. Jesus is looking ahead to what is coming, to the hardest part of his ministry here on earth. And his disciples are not ready. Clearly, they are not ready.

Jesus is shifting gears in his ministry. From now until the end, it is all focused on Jerusalem. We will talk more about that on Wednesday, and in the coming weeks, but, for now,

⁴ Luke 3:22.

just know that the entire rest of Jesus' ministry, the next fourteen chapters of Luke's gospel, is focused on what is coming in Holy Week.

Jesus' disciples at the foot of the mountain are not the only ones who are not ready. We, too, are not ready.

Jesus' disciples need to be transfigured. They need to have all the mundane, worldly stuff stripped away, revealing the children of God whom they are underneath. They need to see the children of God in themselves, so that they can see the children of God in other faces. They need to see the children of God in themselves, so that they can be the children of God in the world.

We, too, need to be transfigured. We need to have the mundane, worldly stuff stripped away, revealing the children of God whom we are and whom we were made to be. We need to see the children of God in ourselves, so that we can see the children of God in other faces. We need to see the children of God in ourselves, before we can be the children of God in the world.

Transfiguration is not easy. Change, it has been said, is always painful and difficult. But this change is not self-directed. We do not have to figure it all out ourselves. This change is God working on us, slowly but surely, to make us the people whom God always intended us to be.

As Julia Ward Howe wrote,

“In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,

With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me.

As He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free*,

While God is marching on.”⁵

⁵ *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, v.5. The third line is altered to say “live,” rather than “die,” as Howe's 1861 original did. This is in accordance with current practice.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Battle_Hymn_of_the_Republic

Not while we are marching on. This change is not about us. While God is marching on.

Seeing God changed Moses, in ways that all who knew him could see.

Living and walking and working with Jesus changed the Apostles. They started out as ordinary folks, and they became the evangelists who spread the early church from Spain to India, from France to North Africa. They started as ordinary people, working and living their lives in Judea, and they became healers and public speakers and teachers the likes of which the world had never seen. They had been transfigured.

Reading Scripture, taking it seriously, praying, and living and talking and working with God's other Children can change us.

It can strip away the mundane, worldly stuff, like our defenses against empathy. Children are not born indifferent to the suffering of others – that has to be learned, and it can be unlearned.

It can strip away the mundane, worldly stuff, like greed, and self-centeredness, and hate. These things, too, can be unlearned.

Maybe this thing (hold up Bible) and this place (gesture to include the church building) ought to have warning labels.

“NOTICE: May change reader's perspective on the purpose of life.”

“CAUTION: May reduce defenses, allowing natural empathy for people not like you.”

“WARNING: Will likely interfere with business as usual, or politics as usual.”

We in this room are ordinary folks. So were the Apostles, when they met Jesus. Who knows what God may have in store for any of us? It is never too early, and it is never too late for God.

Thank God!

AMEN.