

Sermon Title: Letting it Sink In
Text: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-44
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February 18, 2007
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Transfiguration Sunday

It was in a conversation I had with Amy Bertschausen in the week before she joined us in worship that I was reminded of something that I'm sure has had a significant influence on my faith and ministry. Amy asked if I'd ever had a true "mountaintop" experience... a mystical flash that some people mark as the root experience of God. I was reminded of a winter retreat I went on when I was a Sophomore or Junior in High School.

You need to understand that the church I attended as a youth had a more evangelical flare to it, and these retreats had a very conscious goal of cementing each young person's relationship with God. That meant that the last bit of time we spent together on Saturday night was a "give your life to Christ" worship service. After hours of games, and running around, and just basically having fun, we joined together for singing, witnessing by our slightly older "adult" leaders, and a sermon by a guest preacher that ended with what I can only describe as an "altar call." We were asked to surrender our souls to Jesus, and with a specific prayer, let him in to our hearts.

What sticks in my mind of that worship service is the end altar call, which brought me to the front of the church, on my knees, earnestly seeking that bolt of God's saving presence. I sat, and sat, while all my friends went their way until it was only me and those youth leaders, who knelt with me, put their hands on me, earnestly and feverishly prayed for me. But it was to no avail. After what I remember as hours, those leaders drifted away, and I was alone in my prayers. If being born again was in my cards, it would have to wait for another day. And it has. For now over thirty five years, and if truth be told, it wasn't long after that night that I stopped waiting.

The effect is that I have been left a little leery of stories like the one that frames and focuses our worship this morning. Let me be absolutely clear: it is not that I do not *believe* that such experiences are true, or edifying. I certainly have no need to explain away such experiences that others might report, chalking it up to something on an emotional rather than a spiritual plane. I've known too many who have shared their own truly remarkable stories to ever want to cast doubt on them. I stand in awe of them to be frank.

What I worry about is not that some people have experienced something I have not, but that these sorts of events, which by their very definition are *exceptional* are taken by some to be the norm and rule by which we would dare to judge other's journeys of faith. They're a gift, and as a gift, they should be treasured. But even in the story we spoke between ourselves today, as Jesus went up to the mountain top with Peter and John and James, there were nine other disciples, each so far as we know as earnest as these three, whose eyes would never see such glory. Yet still, they were called to believe.

It was with eyes such as these that I came to the text for this morning, understanding that each year the lectionary brings us to this mountaintop in one form or another, as a pivot point between the Sundays of Epiphany, and our first steps in to the journey of Lent. "Transfiguration Sunday" it is called in the liturgical year. And the easiest translation of that word "transfiguration" in my mind is to see something for what it really is. The thing that caught my imagination and

wouldn't let go was that, as I read and re-read the text, it became clear to me that there is not *one* transfiguration in the words we read, but *three*. And it is at the convergence of those three transfigurations, it occurred to me, that the life of *every* Christian is lived.

I don't need to spend much time on the first one, because it is that most familiar one: the transforming vision that the three disciples got caught up in—the one we *think* of if we think of anything when we hear the word “Transfiguration.” It happens, sometimes, that people when they least expect it get caught up in a thin place of creation—when the reality of God's presence becomes so real that everything is transformed in its light. It comes, as this one came, from out of the blue. And it most often it is gone as suddenly as it comes, leaving those caught up in the experience shivering in a naked sort of reality, silent, and alone.

What struck me in my encounter with the text this time around though, was not the mystery, or the spectacle, but the clear sense of the text that such an experience was not the beginning or the end of the disciple's faith: it was set smack dab in the middle, as puzzling (indeed, the texts says *terrifying*) to them as it is to us. It's over as quickly as it begins, and it leaves you silent—far from being the ground of faith, it is an experience that brings our faith up short.

If the story ended right there, I'm not entirely sure how helpful it would be. But it doesn't. Because there's another transfiguration that awaits the disciples as they make their way back down the mountain, and rejoin the others in the valley below. It's *this* transfiguration that, it seems to me, is most germane to our gathering this morning, as we celebrate the many ways in which we, as a congregation, reach out in ministry and mission to the world around us. And it is, like it's more famous mountaintop cousin, a cautionary tale.

While Jesus and the three disciples were gone, it seems the rest were trying their hand at what Jesus had empowered them to do at the beginning of the chapter from which we'd read: they were healing, and casting our demons: using the faith Jesus had taught to touch the world's deep needs. Just like each one of the hearts on the posters that have lined our worship space these past several weeks. And I imagine it was every bit as rewarding as anyone who put one of those hearts on those posters will tell you it is. To feed one who is hungry, to guide the life of a child, to use your skills and abilities to provide housing for people who would otherwise be homeless is a remarkably rewarding pursuit.

But as Jesus makes his way back into that crowd we learn quickly that all is not well. What happens when our best efforts to heal this world come up short? That's the question that brings us face to face with the *second* transfiguration story. “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child.” Do you hear the echo of the mountain? A child every bit as dear to me as you are to the God who sent you! “I begged your disciples to cast out the demon, but they could not!”

It is at this second stop on the road that I realize that as good as all the things are that we might be about in this world, the object of our faith is not the heal all that hurts in that world. It's not to use our gifts to sort out all that's wrong, and set it right. It's our job to use our gifts as best we can, but when our gifts fail, to point to the one from whom all our blessings flow. We might be able to heal. We might even be able to cast out some of this world's demons. But it takes the

transfigured and transformed hand of Jesus to complete what we can only begin. As certainly as Jesus' countenance was transfigured at the top of the mountain, the healing begun by the disciples was transfigured in Jesus' touch, and the effect on the crowd is exactly the same as it was for Peter and James and John "They were astounded at the greatness of God, and amazed at what he was doing."

This moment of transfiguration works its way into the heart of my faith as a note of humility. As certain as I may be of the good we can do in this world, the truth is that there are things that we will meet along the way that will *not* yield to our best efforts or intentions. That does not mean that our faith is not sufficient...Jesus did not say to his disciples, "why didn't you try just a little harder?" Though he was just a little testy with the father's begging. That, I suppose, is another sermon! What I note is that the God who calls us *up* to the mountaintop also bids us follow into the valley, not because we've got all the answers to everything that's wrong in the world, but so that we might bear witness, through the healing that has been put into your touch, and especially through the healings that have *not* been given to you, to the truth we have seen.

And that, if you're wondering, is the *third* transfiguration I saw in our Gospel lesson for this morning...as surely as Jesus' countenance was transformed on the mountaintop, as sure as the savior's touch transformed the futile attempts of his followers, there's a transformation that Jesus urges upon his disciples, and their *discipleship* as the crowd looks on in adoration for the healing only he could offer: "Let these words sink into your ears," he says, "The son of man is going to be betrayed into human hands."

Kind of a downer, isn't it? You'd think at a moment like this, Jesus might have raised his arms in triumph: See what God's power can do thought me? He might have soaked up the crowd's adoration; basked in their amazement. But a moment of victory over whatever evil it was that possessed the young man who was brought to him was transformed by Jesus into a moment of truth: even with all the power that has been entrusted to me, you've got to understand that my calling in this world is not to bring all creation to its knees. My calling is to pour myself out in order that this world might be healed. Don't get caught up in the hoopla. Keep your eye on *me* because the real miracle of salvation lies in what comes next.

That, I think, is why this story is set in the rhythm of the church year right where it is—the Sunday before Ash Wednesday; the last week before we step into the Lenten fast, and search for some way to prepare for the story that will enfold us in the week of our Lord's passion. Because as wondrous as mountain tops and miraculous healings are, if we set our faith on things such as these we will never grasp the depth, power, and love that God has shown for us in Christ.

Faith itself is transfigured in this last moment of the story we shared: the question is not, as the earnest youth leaders had urged upon me, "will I give my life to Jesus?" The question is whether I will dare to follow One who showed us how to live our lives most fully, not by making the world after our own image, not by single-handedly righting all that is wrong, but by putting all we are and all we can do to the humble service of our creator, even when it just might mean the death of us?

Faith is transfigured in the story of this morning, not on the mountaintop, not in the touch of Jesus that cast out demons that resisted the disciple's best efforts, but when we recognize that the core of Jesus' call us not to *us*, that *we* might be set aside from all hardship and pain and suffering—*saved*, in the way that I think I so deeply longed to be saved as a youth. Faith is transfigured in obedience that follows into the valleys, that lets the truth sink in: "The son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." And yet it follows. Past adoring crowds. Past miraculous healings. Past visions and voices. It follows to the one place in all creation and all time where God's love is most clearly laid bare—to a cross, and through it, an empty tomb.

Let it sink in. This is the true end of our faithfulness. Not to see bright lights, or to heal the world, or even to claim the healing we need from God's hand. The true end of faithfulness is to follow where Christ leads, down the mountain, into the valley, to a forsaken hill named Golgotha. To follow until we see no footsteps, but hear only the voice of one we might mistake for the gardener, speaking our name.

Let us pray.