

## **TRANSFORMATION IS GOOD**

Luke 9:28-36

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
27 February 2022

I read the Bible almost every day, and I have been for decades. I have memorized many passages. One of the favorite hours of my week is the hour between 10:30 and 11:30 on Wednesday morning when about a dozen of us engage in Bible Study together. So keep all of that in mind when I say this - the Bible is an odd and peculiar book. I say it as someone who knows it well and loves much of it.

You can find in the pages of the Bible words of inspiration and comfort, but please don't think of it as a self-help book. It worries me when I hear people who are new to the Christian life say, "I'm going to read the Bible cover to cover." It's not an easily accessible book - in my opinion, much of it is best experienced with guides, in groups.

And today's passage is one of the most odd and peculiar in the gospels. This morning, I'm taking us on a tour of this passage. We'll walk in and through it together. And my goal is to leave you with two take-aways, two messages from this passage for this moment.

This story is called the Transfiguration, and to prepare to visit it, to enter its world, I invite you to think of a time when were in touch with your imagination. A time when you were completely relaxed, not overwhelmed by problems, not focused on the

news...maybe remember what it was like when you were a child, and you took the time to daydream, to look at the clouds...

This story has a dream-like quality to it. It loses its power when we try to pin it down with logic, when we start asking, "But how could that really happen?" This is a story with a different kind of truth and meaning.

All through the gospels, we see Jesus making time for prayer. It often happens after he has been with the crowds. After he has preached to a big group, after he has healed many people, after the miracle of the loaves and the fishes...in moments like that, he'll go away by himself. He'll take a boat out onto the lake, he'll climb into the hills, he'll walk towards the desert...he needs to reconnect with God, to replenish his own spiritual resources. But this time is different. He doesn't go alone. He takes Peter, James and John with him, up the mountain to pray.

We don't know why. Maybe he's preparing them for the time, soon to come, when he'll no longer be with them physically. Is he perhaps teaching them, by example, that they too will need to develop this habit, so that they have something to give people?

While Jesus is praying, something mysterious happens. His face changes, and his clothes look as if they're flashed white with lightning. Then Moses and Elijah appear - these two pillars of the faith - then a cloud envelops them all, and from the cloud, a voice: "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!" Then Moses and Elijah disappear, and Jesus looks normal again.

We don't know what Peter, James and John think about what they've just witnessed. Peter tries to capture it - he offers to build three tents on top of the mountain,

so that Moses, Elijah and Jesus can stay up on the mountain together. Maybe he thinks it would be nice to always have them available. But do you know what it's like when you try to capture a magical moment with your camera? You might take a beautiful picture, but you're also out of the experience the minute you try to capture it. The moment is gone as quickly and unexpectedly as it came.

Nothing even remotely similar to the Transfiguration has ever happened to me, or to anyone I know. But plenty of things have happened in my life that I can't explain. Some of the experiences in my life for which I am most grateful are somewhat mysterious. I remember sitting in a college classroom reading a sermon called, "You Are Accepted." We were engaged in a scholarly discussion about grace and I realized that I'd been listening to sermons about grace my entire life, and I'd taken those words to heart, but I'd never thought about them intellectually. In that classroom, my head and my heart came together. It was the first "aha" moment that eventually led me to the vocation of ministry.

You can't plan moments like that. You can't orchestrate experiences that move you.

Did you plan to fall in love? Or did it take you by surprise? When is the last time you heard a piece of music that seemed to elevate you? When have you found yourself in a mountaintop experience, fully present, fully alive, transported to a different realm of existence, even for a few minutes?

Those moments are gifts. They give us a glimpse of the kind of life God wants for us, a life that is more than what we can explain by reason and logic.

Sometimes we try so hard to plan everything, to control our environment, that we eliminate the possibility of surprise and the experience of wonder. Yet God manages to get our attention anyway - just as happened with Peter, James and John.

These three would never forget what happened on top of the mountain. Oh, they weren't perfect disciples after that. We know that Peter will go on to deny even knowing Jesus. But they're changed. They have seen who Jesus really is, his identity has been confirmed, and they know that life includes encounters with mystery.

I didn't have to preach about this odd and peculiar story today - I could have picked any passage from the Bible. This passage speaks to me because it reminds me of what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid that we have become people who no longer dare to dream, people who have stopped imagining better futures.

The events of the past two years in particular have us living in survival mode. We have all been hunkered down, in bunker mentalities. Occasionally we've come up for air, made plans, and then had to cancel them. We're tired of being disappointed, we're weary of all the pivoting. Covid, climate change, mental health crises, supply chain shortages, addiction, polarization, burnout at work, and now war. It's not surprising that we have lost touch with our ability to dream. We can barely remember what it was like look up at the sky and feel a sense of awe.

The story of the transfiguration is a reminder that God wants more for our lives than mere survival. It's a reminder that we are all capable of change. And once we believe that WE are capable of transformation - then we can collectively affirm that our

world can be transformed. We do not have to accept that the way things are is the way things always have to be.

I promised you two takeaways from this story.

The first is this. Our ability to share God's love with the world is directly related to our own experiences of awe and wonder. If we don't love this life, this world, then how can we be motivated to try to make it better? Experiences of awe and wonder are not luxuries; they are essential. Nurturing our own spirits isn't selfish; it prepares us to walk down the mountain again and engage in the hard work of justice and compassion. So get back in touch with what moves you - music, art, nature, laughter, relationships, deep conversations -

Here's how one writer\* put it just this week: "There is no doubt that there is much in need of healing in the world around us today, just as there was in Jesus' day. And we are often overcome with weariness, if not outright despair. Our prayers alone won't be enough to stop Putin, prevent another surge in COVID numbers, change the hearts of those who are spouting racism and homophobia, or protect us from any of the other stressors we are negotiating. However, I do wonder how long it has been since any of us have gone off to a quiet place to seek out the glory of God. How long has it been since you have sat still or quiet for more than a few minutes? How long has it been since you recognized God moving in your life or in the world around you?"

My theory is that Transfiguration isn't as uncommon as we think; we just fail to notice. We are so busy staving off stress, that we forget that the world is filled with the

glory of God, that WE are filled with the glory of God. Instead of dismissing our mountaintop moments as figments of our imaginations, perhaps we'd be better served by giving thanks for those glimpses of glory. Then, maybe, a bit of our weariness will be lifted and we will have the energy, the faith, the hope needed to continue the works of healing in the world."

Takeaway #2: Don't be afraid of what changes God is calling you to make. Perhaps these next 40 days are a time of deep listening. As we start the season of Lent, pay attention to what God is saying to you about transforming your life. The amazing preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes this about entering the wilderness season of Lent:

"Most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work, so addicted to our pleasures, and so resistant to our depths that a nice long spell in the wilderness is just what we need.

If you've been looking for some excuse to head to your own mountaintop and pray, this is it. If you've been looking for some way to trade in your old certainties for new movement in your life, look no further. This is your chance to enter the cloud of unknowing and listen for whatever it is that God has to say to you. This is your chance to encounter God's contagious glory, so that a little of that shining rubs off on you.

Today you have heard a story you can take with you when you go. It tells you that no one has to go up the mountain alone. It tells you that sometimes things get really scary before they get holy. Above all, it tells you that there is someONE standing in

the center of the cloud with you, shining so brightly that you may never be able to wrap your mind around him, but who is worth listening to all the same--because he is God's beloved, and you are his. Forever and always.

Let us pray. Holy God, help us to not be afraid of change, because you are always with us. Reawaken us to the power of dreams and imagination, so that we can work with you towards a future of peace, wholeness for all people and all living things. In the name of Jesus whose light shines brightly. Amen.

*\*"This quote is shared with permission. © Rachael Keefe BeachTheology.com."  
Barbara Brown Taylor quote from: [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037fe/the\\_bright\\_cloud\\_of\\_unknowing](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037fe/the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing)*