



BEYOND WORDS

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY | LUKE 9:28-43

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I have another story from my theological college days for you; not from preaching class this time, but from a pastoral care class. Our class was a mixed bunch of students, all ages and backgrounds, many second career students like me, heading toward ministry either in churches or in chaplaincies. But there is a certain amount of privilege that comes with being free and able to go to college and live in Toronto and undertake that kind of training and education. Our professor looked out at us one day, seeing us, I suspect, with our MacBooks and tidy clothes and warm, puffy parkas heaped in the corner, and proposed a scenario.

Imagine, she said, that you were called to the home of a person in crisis. When you got there, this person was sitting alone in the corner of a room, on a not-very-clean floor, in not-very-clean clothes, rambling and crying and curled in on themselves, having pushed away and refused help from their family. And there you are, in your nice suit and clergy shirt, taught and trained, Bible in hand, ready to help; but what do you do? What do you do?

And being the sort of professor she was, this was not a rhetorical question - we actually had to answer her, then and there.

It was a scenario for ministers and chaplains in training, of course, but it's a fair question for any Christian, I think. Confronted with someone at the lowest point in their lives, hurting, in a mess and resistant to help: what do you do? What would you do?

The mountaintop experience of the transfiguration of Jesus is the last stop before we begin the forty-day journey of Lent on Wednesday later this week. Lent will lead us to another mountaintop and Jesus' face once again changed; not in glory this time, but in suffering and death. Because this mysterious and extraordinary event, which appears in three of the gospels, because it immediately precedes the beginning of the end for Jesus' earthly life, it's often understood as a bucking-up, encouraging event for the disciples. It's Jesus giving his followers a strong picture to hold onto as they enter into the dark days of his suffering and death.

Courage for the journey, a hopeful image to return to and ground themselves in, so they could push through and endure the bleakness of Good Friday on the way to the hope of Easter morning.

The transfiguration might well also be a bucking-up event for Jesus, too, a pep talk from Moses and Elijah and even God the Father, who appears as an obscuring cloud and a booming voice, declaring that Jesus is indeed his loved and chosen Son, part of God's own self.

Luke offers us his own unique take on the familiar mystery of the transfiguration. The other gospel accounts simply say that Jesus was transfigured and that Moses and Elijah just appeared; Luke tells us that Jesus' face changed, along with his clothing, and that Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about his upcoming departure. Here, as in Matthew and Mark's version, only three disciples from among the twelve are summoned and selected to make this journey with Jesus, where they will stand witness to this very special event. It's a unique experience, unmatched in the gospels; they've never seen Jesus like this, face changed, all in glowing white. They are moved, dazzled, perhaps even a little afraid.

No explanation is given beyond God's words identifying Jesus, recapitulating the words spoken at Jesus' baptism. Afterwards, Peter, James and John never talk about it, or at least, never write about it, beyond this barebones account of what happened. Jesus never talks about it, either. The disciples seem to remain silent about their experience on the mountaintop, perhaps only privately making their own meaning and weaving it into their faith story. We never find out if seeing Jesus, transfigured, glowing in white, surrounded by cloud and prophets and God's own voice booming...we never find out how exactly it changed things for the disciples or what they did with the experience.

To some degree, that's true of all our experiences of God's overwhelming glory, of God's holiness and power, whether we glimpse it in worship, in some meaningful or moving spiritual event, on a retreat, in prayer, in a hospital room or at home during our devotionals. Something we might feel or see or know, in some deep way, that reveals the glory and mystery of God to us personally, that we weren't quite able to communicate to people who weren't part of our mountaintop experience.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai after his conference with God, his face was changed, shining, and he put a veil over it, to dull the brightness a

little, so God's people could look at him. I wonder if that veil over Moses' face didn't also make him a little mysterious himself, a little removed from the rest of the people, different and alone because of what he had experienced.

And that's kind of the thing about experiencing firsthand God's glory or holiness or overwhelming presence, face to face. Some people call them "God moments." When we have them, they are wonderful, exhilarating for us, but they are challenging to speak about to someone who wasn't there or hasn't had a comparable experience of their own, drawing a veil of sorts between us and the people in our lives who can't understand. It can be frustrating and perhaps even a little isolating to see the mystery in a unique personal way, and be unable to share it with others, with people who don't share our faith.

The flip side of experiencing a God moment, though, is that we might start to believe that these powerful, fleeting experiences of God's glory are all that faith is supposed to be about. We can fall into the trap that Peter apparently does while up on that mountain when he asks to build the dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah - that sustaining the mystery and the mystique is the point of Christian faith. It's like wanting to figure out a way to wear that veil over our faces all the time, staying a bit removed and mysterious to an unbelieving world, lifting it only when we're in those places or moments when we connect with God in extraordinary ways.

We can start to think about worship this way, too, if we're not careful. We can believe that if we're not feeling something each Sunday or if we're not learning something powerful and new, then worship has become pointless. We can get addicted to mountaintop experiences of God, and feel that we are not getting what we came for at church, or what we need in our personal relationship-building time with God.

Neither God nor his Son Jesus are about a faith that is practiced in holy isolation, in high moments, or only on special days. We have to fight, sometimes even with ourselves, against any understanding of the faith that says God is only for certain times or can be known only by certain people. Any form of Christian life that calls us to be isolated, a little removed from the world, high on a spiritual mountaintop, is the opposite of what Jesus is all about.

When Jesus is transfigured and his glory is revealed, the disciples saw him also talking to Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures in the history and faith of God's people.

Moses, of course, led the people on their exodus, out of enslavement and captivity in Egypt, through the wilderness for forty years, and to the very edge of their new, promised homeland. He spoke face-to-face with God atop a mountain to receive the law, God's word for holy living. Elijah was a prophet, yanking the people back from the brink of wandering into harmful, wrong beliefs, again and again, going toe-to-toe with kings and queens and priests of a false god. And he, too, met God face-to-face on a mountain, famously not in a great and powerful wind, not in a ground-shaking earthquake, not in a blazing fire...but in a gentle whisper. And like Moses' veil, Elijah, too, pulled his cloak over his face.

Extraordinary men, who had their own deeply transformative mountaintop God moments. So why do they appear at this moment of Jesus' own mountaintop experience?

Well, symbolically, they represent two great pillars of how God's people had historically encountered and followed God, before Jesus: the law and the prophets. They might well also have been some moral support for Jesus, too, before he embarked on the most painful and difficult weeks of his earthly life and death. Moses and Elijah knew all about the pain and challenge and the burden, quite frankly, of leading others to follow God, and they knew all about the beauty and wonder and significance of it, too.

Luke tells us that these three great men talked together about Jesus' departure, referring, as you might have guessed, to his death on the cross. The actual word used for departure here is "exodus;" and that, combined with Moses' presence offers a slightly different understanding of what the cross - Jesus' death and resurrection - do and mean. Jesus' departure - his exodus - through death will be an exodus for humanity; it'll be the moment in which God's people will forever be led to freedom.

This view of the cross as a means of liberation, of freeing captive humanity, is very consistent with the overall message of Luke's gospel, which is the social justice gospel, reversing the old, unfair world order, for a new kingdom-shaped creation. There are many different views of the cross in the Bible and in church doctrine: as a price paid for sin, as our punishment borne by Jesus to satisfy God's just abhorrence for sin, as a bridge built over the chasm sin has made between us and God. Luke nudges us toward something a little different: the cross as a new exodus, freeing us from captivity to sin and all its terrible effects.

And freedom, too, from the idea that God is unreachable, removed from us and our world; freedom from the belief that we must climb up, somehow, to get to him. Jesus' exodus shows us that everyone in any circumstance is already with God; mountaintop or low as we can go, God is present there.

It's a powerful reminder that Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, from his birth to his death and into what followed after.

After his mountaintop transfiguration experience with Peter, James and John, Jesus came down from the mountain.

They waded into a huge, shouting, pressing crowd. From within that mass of clamouring humanity, a father cries out for help for his son, a sick boy suffering from seizures, in our modern medical worldview, and even Jesus' own disciples couldn't help. It's called an unclean spirit here, but whatever name is given to the problem, the root cause is still sin. Not that the boy or his father or anyone has done something bad or wrong to warrant the boy's illness; it's sin in creation, the brokenness of all things and the marring of all life by the power of sin corroding God's good creation. While we certainly saw Jesus' identity and purpose revealed in glorious, vibrant, transforming light on the mountaintop, proclaimed by God's own voice...we see it even more clearly, I think, in what Jesus did in this painful, hurting, accusing situation he climbed down into.

If Jesus had been transfigured, with his changed face and blazing white robe, and the voice in the cloud said, this is my Son, my Chosen, in order to communicate that faith is only about super transcendent moments on spiritual mountaintops, then Jesus probably would have said: "Sorry about your kid, but I've got other important mountains to climb and be glorious on." But that's not who Jesus is or why God sent him into this world. Jesus stops right in the middle of this messy situation and responds compassionately to what he finds. He heals the boy - frees him from his illness - and gives him back to his father.

I was telling you about the pastoral care scenario that one of my professors posed to a classroom of ministers and chaplains in training: a person sitting alone in the corner of a room, messy and hurting and accusing, at the lowest of low moments. And I asked you all, what you would do. Are you still confident in your answer?

In what times or places in your lives have you seen glimpses of Jesus' revealed glory? On exultant mountaintops, spiritual or literal? On the ordinary terrain of your everyday life? At your lowest, messiest moments?

There's nothing wrong with mountaintop God moments - they are gifts from God, and they do sustain and ignite our faith in a special way - but neither are we meant to stay there, gazing at the veiled face of divine glory.

But Jesus is just as readily found on the ordinary terrain of human existence, and so we, his church, the Body of Christ, must also climb down and be present there, revealing Christ's identity anew to the hurting, suffering, accusing crowds. Staying in our churches and only doing holy things together would be staying on the mountaintop; pushing, in our spiritual lives, for elevated personal experiences, day by day, would be staying on the mountaintop.

Following Jesus and climbing down from the mountain...now what might that look like, here in Sarnia or wherever you're from?

We lift the veil ever so slightly and reveal the life-giving effect of God's grace in us when we act in saving ways to bring healing, hope, peace, dignity, justice and love. That's what Jesus came to do; and if we are truly his, then we must go and do likewise.

Jesus' transfiguration and his death on the cross reveal that God climbs down into every possible dark place we might find ourselves in, and frees us from it, shows us the way out to abundant life in him once more. One day, it will be clear that Jesus' love and power to heal has indeed embraced the whole world. One day it will be fully revealed, unveiled to all who are seeking freedom from the captivity of their brokenness, that freedom is to be found in following Jesus. One great day on the other side of this aching life it will be clear as sunrise that God has healed us and claims us for his own.

I think that's why Jesus took three of his disciples up that mountain with him and then back down again, because his transfiguration and what happened after are together a brief, shining vision of that great future day.

Life, by and large, is not lived on mountaintops, but the memory can help sustain us in our lowest moments. And it trains our eyes and ears to perceive Jesus's work on ordinary, everyday terrain. As sparing as the gospel writers all are in their accounts, what happened on the mountaintop that long ago day was a glorious, hopeful, bright vision, in a place of revelation. What happened below, after Jesus climbed down, is equally glorious, hopeful and bright as we see Jesus at work in the hurting places of mission. Places where Jesus still works, very often through us, his followers, today. Thanks be to God. Amen.