

## *Transfiguration of Our Lord*

March 3, 2019

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 9: 28-36)

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 convulses him 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.

The Gospel of Our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"On the mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. As glory leaks from every pore, three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response – 'Let's make tents! Let's stay here always! This is good!' A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelopes the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come. But a voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. 'This is my Son, my Chosen.' The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master – the Shining One – and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars. 'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.'"

“In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes – wide open, feral – see nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their hands in shame. ‘Frauds!’ someone yells into the night. ‘Charlatans!’ ‘Where is your Master?’ the scribes ask the disciples for the umpteenth time. ‘Why has he left you?’ ‘We don’t know,’ the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again. . . He flails, and his limbs assault his stricken face. A voice – strangled, singular – rends the night. ‘This is my son!’ a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest. “Please,” he sobs to the stars. “Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him.”<sup>1</sup>

There is beauty and pain in these stories as told here by Debie Thomas. There’s a tension between the great joy on the mountain and the great grief in the valley, the bright shining glory and the deep shadows, the presence of God, and a child unhealed.

Why does Luke put them together? Are they the holy and the unholy? The good and the bad? Are they opposites? Or are they the same story?

It begins on the mountain. We’ve been on the mountain. Well, maybe not on a real mountain, but we know what it’s like to be touched by wonder and mystery.

Like looking deep into the eyes of a newborn child – so new to the earth – and seeing the depths of eternity.

Or walking in fresh fallen snow. Okay. Yes, I know, there’s two feet of snow out there now, and it’s getting old. But there is something about that walk in the evening, when world is hushed, and even the air smells clean.

Or have you ever had a dream that was so real, and so true, that there is a wondrous beauty to it, and it wakes you up, and the memory of it stays with you all day?

Or there is that song or musical theme that touches your heart and fills your soul.

These moments, these moments all have a timeless quality to them. Your whole being is fully present. And that’s okay because there is nowhere else you would rather be. We all experience those moments that are deeply personal, deeply connected, filed with mystery and wonder.

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas, “Light and Shadows,” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2100>, accessed Mar. 1, 2019.

It is as if God is touching us. We are catching a glimpse of God, a glimpse of another world. Those times have long been called “thin places,” places of transcendence – in the eyes of a newborn, the truth of the dream, the hushed world of a snowfall – we see the vision of a world made whole. We see the presence of God leaking in these thin places around us. We see what is good and holy and really real.

Peter and James and John were in such a space that day on the mountain. It was something beyond words, beyond understanding. Something pure and mysterious, and real. And they didn’t know what to do with it.

During the school year, I work with ninth-graders as they prepare for confirmation. And I’m discovering more and more that, like many of us, they don’t know what to do with mystery. They don’t know what to do with holy. Like the disciples, we don’t have language for it. There is no guide for experiencing the holy. We who have been taught that for something to be real it has to be captured and examined. We are uncomfortable with wonder. We who are taught to be in control of our emotions, our thoughts, our time, our world, we don’t know what to do with an encounter with the unknown. We have no guide for these thin places where God touches the earth.

We see God. But we want to capture it and analyze it. Peter wanted to build a shelter. We want to take a picture. We want to take a picture and preserve that moment. It’s gotten to the point now here at weddings, or at the grave side of funerals, I have to tell people, “Put your phones away.” You cannot capture this feeling. You cannot capture this moment. We can’t hold onto it. It’s bigger than a photograph.

So what can we do in the midst of mystery? What can we do in beauty or truth or transcendence that takes our breath away? We can only open ourselves up, open ourselves fully to the experience of it. We can only let it fill us just then. Let it remind us what is real and true and of God. We need that. We need that feeling of it. We need that memory of it. Because someday we’ll find ourselves in the valley.

While Peter and James and John were on the mountain in the presence of the holy, the other disciples were in the midst of the pain and the failure and the grief in the valley.

And, yes, we have been in the valley, too. Wondering what to do. Standing in the shadows, longing for any sign to guide us. We’ve been there in the emptiness that comes after a great loss, the agony before a big decision, the frustration of standing helpless in the midst of pain or need. We have encountered those moments when we are tested by circumstance, with no safety, no resource, no control.

The mountain and the valley. Are they opposites? Good and bad? Holy and unholy? Sacred and secular? Or are they all one story? I love that these two stories are here together. I love that they run in parallel. I love the tension between them: Glory and brokenness, beauty and messiness. I love that these two stories are told together, because together they are one story, and it is our story

Here is what I mean. I think most of us go through life as a routine. We get up, we eat our cornflakes, we go to work, or to school, or to projects. We eat, we wash, we run errands, we sleep. And we think nothing extraordinary happens to me.

But transcendence comes unbidden – and often unnoticed. We can put ourselves in places where God often appears, like on mountains, or at church, or among the poor. But God is not limited to those places. God’s glory bursts forth anywhere, any time.

And if we are attentive, if we are paying attention, we can find ourselves surprised by a burning bush, or a pillar of cloud, or a baby’s deep gaze, or a snow-filled evening. God comes and touches the earth anywhere, any time.

There are thin places of transcendence everywhere. And we can be filled by them. When you see God in the everyday, you may never look at every-day life the same way again. You come away transformed. Which is good, because every day holds beauty and brokenness, transcendence and emptiness. And we can carry the glory of God with us into both, for our own sake and the sake of the world.

On a mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. In the valley, a father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest. “Please,” he sobs to the stars.

What he needs most are disciples who carry the light of Christ in them. Disciples who have been paying attention to the beauty and mystery of God’s presence all around them. He needs disciples who are filled with wholeness and the presence of God. He needs disciples that can share the love and the light of Jesus.

We can be those disciples.

Amen.