

## **“The Dangers and Possibilities of Transfiguration”**

**Luke 9:28-36**

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Most of us have had moments of transfiguration, experiences in which we catch a glimpse of the Holy and thus see not only God in some way but also ourselves more clearly. “Thin places” is a term some use for occasions when the distance between heaven and earth is small. For me these moments have often come while running.

One fall morning I ran to the top of Beech Mountain through a fog all the way to the old Land of Oz theme park. It was partly the endorphins, partly the altitude and partly the fog, but I not only saw the Tin Man, I sensed the nearness of God.

Two years ago I had a similar experience running in Oban during our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary trip to Scotland. It was a brisk Scottish morning, which is redundant, but as I ran along the harbor up to the Dunollie Castle ruins and breathed in the fresh air and the history, I just had this sense that I was not alone.

Fifteen years ago I was running in Kenya on a conservancy near the Malewa River. I was with a group of doctors and nurses from the church I served in Winston-Salem on a partnership mission trip, but I run everywhere I go. This day I ran with the warthogs literally as two jumped up beside me and ran along for a time, with waterbucks, Thomson’s gazelles and giraffes in sight. It was a magnificent experience, especially since neither the leopards that I later learned lived on the land nor the lion someone had spotted showed up to eat me.

Transfiguration experiences, no matter where and how we have them, can be wonderful and transforming, but they can also be dangerous and not just when leopards and lions might join the party.

One reason is that there is substantial room for misunderstanding. This is the case for Peter, John and James as they experience Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain. They don’t understand what is happening. When Moses and Elijah show up in some sort of sacred

vision, Peter offers to build three dwelling places. He thinks they are going to set up camp for a while. He doesn't understand. This is not my observation, it's Luke's, and even after the Voice from a cloud says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" they don't get it because they don't really listen to him even after this experience.

So, transfiguration experiences can be misunderstood because by their very nature, they are mysterious, and thus there is some danger here. There is also the danger of thinking that we can manufacture transfiguration moments for ourselves or the church. These are genuine "wow" moments that inspire and transform us. So, once we have had one, we yearn for more, especially when we get bogged down in the routine places of life and the places of great struggle. And in a time when the church is struggling to find its place in the midst of rapid change, it is tempting to try to orchestrate something spectacular.

But the truth is we cannot orchestrate transfiguration experiences. They are of God, initiated by God and up to God. We can create an openness to the Holy through habits of devotion or practices of service, by paying attention to the wonder of creation. But there is no formula to conjure up the Divine. Peter, John and James go up the mountain with Jesus to pray, but they pray other times and go up other mountains without experiencing transfiguration.

In regard to church experiences, we can certainly create space for the Holy, indeed we try to every week in worship, but there is no magic formula. Churches can orchestrate emotional experiences. I could tell you stories you would not believe about what churches have done to stir up emotion and gather a crowd, but a planned, circus-like spectacle is not a transfiguration. And lest anyone be offended by the term "circus-like", a Methodist church in Richmond, Virginia used to bring a real lion and lamb, with a trainer, into their sanctuary during Advent. The minister's brother ran a circus. You just can't make up this stuff...

So, transfiguration experiences can be dangerous because we may misunderstand them and we may be tempted to try to manufacture them. But perhaps the greatest danger of all is being led to believe that the best stuff of faith always happens on a mountaintop. There is no question that we all need mountaintop experiences. There is no question that

Peter, John and James benefit from this experience when Jesus is transfigured before their very eyes, with his face being changed, his clothes turning white and a Voice speaking to them from a cloud. We too benefit from the record of this experience.

But do we not learn just as much or more about who Jesus is and who we are called to be from the cross as we do from the Mount of Transfiguration? Do we not learn as much from the manger, from the evening when Jesus washes his disciples' feet, from the empty tomb and the conversation on the way to Emmaus? Not all of life is about the spectacular and many genuine transfiguration moments don't take place on the mountaintops of life, literally or figuratively. For the heart of transfiguration lies in understanding more clearly who God is, who Christ is and who we are. These things can happen in many different places of life. Yet as long as we acknowledge this and recognize the dangers, transfiguration moments are also full of possibility.

Some of them happen in the context of worship services. This was the case for the Japanese Baptist Church last week when the Hiott Classroom was packed full, words of affirmation for Pastor Jun were shared, prayers were lifted up, hymns were sung and God was made known. This happens for us sometimes at a special service like Hanging of the Greens or Ash Wednesday or during a dedication or baptism, but sometimes it happens during an ordinary service when for reasons we cannot explain, the ordinary is transcended, we sense the nearness of God in a more profound way, and we experience transfiguration.

I remember a communion service in my last setting. We celebrated communion there once a month, as we do here, but every other month people came forward for kneeling communion. There was just something about coming forward and kneeling at the altar, something we don't do much anymore, and there kneeling before a large cross suspended above the pulpit, that made communion special. But this day was even more special. It had something to do with several long-time saints who were struggling with major life issues just by chance or providence kneeling together. Several of them might never make it to the rail again. This could be our last communion together in this life. Words cannot express the fullness of that moment.

But, of course, transfiguration can happen in private times of devotion as well. I remember quite vividly a devotional experience in Israel when I was reading a bit of Thomas Merton, looking down upon Lake Galilee from the Arbel Cliff and envisioning Jesus' travels back and forth between Nazareth and Capernaum. I did not see him walking that path before me, but I could imagine him there and sensed the presence of the Holy on that site that has so much significant history.

We can also experience transfiguration in ordinary moments of life and in times of great need. Many times while waiting for death with a family, I have experienced a sense of the Holy with those families. Someone has said that at no place in this life are we closer to God than we are at birth and death. Again and again I have found this to be true.

And then, we often experience transfiguration in the midst of service. We see God while relating to clothing ministry clients, while serving at Toy Joy, while doing mission work or disaster relief.

I think of a friend who was finally able to go to seminary in mid-life after years of sensing her calling but feeling a need to be home with her sons. When they got to a certain age, she decided to go the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and had a wonderful experience until she confronted BTSR's mission immersion requirement. She was to go to Zimbabwe, but she still had children at home and didn't think she should have to go.

After a good bit of back and forth, she finally worked it out and went, kicking and screaming, and when she did, her entire life was turned upside down, transformed. It's not just that she had a meaningful experience of service. She discovered her life's calling of enabling individuals, churches and the Alliance of Baptists to do ministry in Zimbabwe, partnering with Henry Mugabe and the Baptist Seminary of Zimbabwe, starting the Goats for Gweru Project.

I suppose this last story points out not just another possibility of transfiguration but another danger as well. When we come face to face with God and hear the Voice of God as Peter, John and James do, our lives are changed. That too is a part of transfiguration, we too are transformed. But that is a good thing, is it not, so long as we are transformed in such a way that we become more and more like Jesus.