

## **“A Perspective on Transfiguration We Can Embrace”**

**Luke 9:28–36**

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The familiar story of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain before Peter, James, and John is often viewed as a last glimpse of glory for these early disciples before the long, tough road that will lead to a cross. Their memory of Jesus with his clothes dazzling white, Moses and Elijah appearing, a cloud overshadowing them and a voice speaking from it, will sustain them on their journey. In like manner, as we read this story just before Lent each year, its purpose is to strengthen us for this journey through the darkness on the way to light.

The challenge for us is that it feels like we have already been on a long, dark journey for two years. We’re not looking for a last glimpse of glory; we’re looking for the first glimpse! We don’t need more darkness; we’re ready to come into the light and stay in the light, and it feels like between the emergence of spring and the apparent fading of the pandemic, this may finally be possible! So, what do we do with this text, this great story of transfiguration?

Well, setting aside the fact that staying in the light is not possible — we don’t get to do away with suffering and hardship just because we want to any more than we get to end the pandemic because we are tired of it — setting all of this aside, there is another way of viewing this story. It has been viewed as a glimpse into the future, a foretaste of the resurrection, or perhaps even a future experience that has been reimagined as happening before Jesus’ death and resurrection. As such, this story provides a basis of hope for something better — for the first disciples and us — an image of a future that is sure to be, a future filled with light and meaning. That feels like a perspective we can embrace.

One aspect of this image of the future is the capacity to see and embrace the holy. Peter, James, and John have the kind of experience we all long for — a vision of the sacred that cannot be denied. They see

Jesus transformed, and they will never forget this. They do not see God; they only hear a Voice speaking. They do not fully understand what is happening, as evidenced by Peter's offer to build three tents for the holy figures. And it is only these three who have this experience, the other nine disciples will have to take their word for it. But their experience is, nonetheless, powerful and transforming.

In our reading from Exodus, Moses has an experience like this, one that causes the skin on his face to shine, but the people who have to take his word for it are frightened, so frightened Moses has to wear a veil. There is something different about this experience, but not that different. We need to be careful not to embrace a false comparison of faiths, one that Paul seems to propose in our reading from 2 Corinthians — Jewish people cannot see God while Christians can. But most early Christians are Jewish and Paul is critical not of all Jews but of certain ones with a competing view of Jesus. He names them in 2 Corinthians 11. We talked recently during a Wednesday night series about ways we can fight anti-Semitism. One way we can do this is by refusing to embrace false comparisons in which Jews are less ethical, noble, and faithful.

What our story is telling us is that it is possible for frail human beings to look upon the holy, to see God clearly. We all struggle to do this, even as Christians, but it is possible. Like Peter, James, and John, we can have mountaintop experiences in which God seems to turn on a spotlight and we just can't miss it — at the birth of a child, at the death of a loved one, on a mission trip. I recall time spent in the mountains of Kenya with a church family with whom we built a bridge over a river. A sense of the holy was ever-present as we built the bridge, worshiped together, and shared fellowship. We can have experiences like this.

But God is present not just in mountaintop experiences but in every part of life. “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age,” the resurrected Christ tells his disciples. The only question is whether we recognize this holy presence, whether we have eyes to see.

There are clues within the transfiguration narrative as to how we develop such vision. The disciples go up on the mountain with Jesus to pray, and it is while they are praying that Jesus' appearance is transformed, and thus they are able to see him for who he really is. The

immediate takeaway is that prayer is the key and this is part of the story. Prayer is, at its core, an experience of the presence of God, or at least a yearning for that experience. It also involves conversation, expressing thoughts and emotions to God and listening for God's voice speaking to us. But it begins and ends with an experience of God's presence.

It isn't a mechanical procedure — we say a prayer and God appears like a Genie out of a bottle. It doesn't depend on specific words or actions — like bowing our heads or closing our eyes — though certain habits can center us and open us to the holy. It's not a magical experience or one that calls for a false kind of piety. One of my sisters once followed my blessing for a meal by sarcastically telling a friend — see, he uses that ministerial voice when he prays! She said this to irritate me... I use my natural voice because that is how we speak to God.

The essence of prayer is simply a yearning for God, an openness to God, the God who is present in every aspect of life, every part of creation. And this is the key to seeing the holy. Thomas Merton once said that the desire to please God pleases God. In like manner, the yearning for God eventually leads to an experience of God.

But there is another clue in the narrative that might help us to see the holy. The disciples go up the mountain together. Nothing can replace personal experience, but discernment is enhanced significantly when it takes place in community. Sometimes we can miss what is right in front of our eyes.

When I was walking our German Shepherds recently at the North Carolina Museum of Art, I passed a couple who were obviously bird watching, the woman with her glasses, the man with binoculars, very intently. As we approached them, a magnificent hawk soared over us before landing on an exhibit right behind the man. But as he was peering intently through his binoculars into the sky, looking for birds, he missed the hawk. As I passed him, I pointed up behind him, and after a moment of confusion, he looked up, saw the hawk and gazed in amazement, as the woman with him laughed at the irony.

We all miss things that are right in front of us, important things, including God at times. Thus, while our yearning for God is key, it helps to have others yearning with us.

The future image we find in the transfiguration story includes our capacity to see the holy. It also points to our ability to hear the Divine calling and listen to it. The story ends with the Voice telling the disciples, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” This is the ultimate purpose of this holy encounter. It’s not just that the disciples see Jesus for who he really is; it’s that having seen him, they will listen to his voice, which means not only hearing his teachings but following them. We might think they are already listening to him. They have left all to follow him. But they argue with him every step of the way. Just before they go up on the mountain to pray, he talks to them about his suffering and death, but they are having no part of that conversation.

To listen, to truly listen, is not simply to hear and understand, but to obey. The Latin roots of these two words — listen and obey — are related. In this glorious vision of future possibility, headstrong disciples are so awed and humbled by the holy that they end up learning to listen to the One they will call Savior and Lord.

To be sure, it is still a work-in-progress. They will continue to struggle all the way to the cross and resist any teaching that goes against what they believe to be true or just don’t want to hear. But over time, they will listen more and more, and in the light of the resurrection, they will follow the most difficult teachings of all.

Such is our calling, our privilege and responsibility. Such is our challenge and opportunity. In the light of the resurrection, foreshadowed in this story of transfiguration, we can learn to listen to Jesus’ teachings, truly listen. It is for us, too, a work-in-progress, but we can learn and grow in our capacity to listen.

Often the things we struggle to hear are things we know deep down are true. I have shared with some of you before the story about a man in my previous setting who spoke courageously at a church conference during the Civil Rights Movement. The pastor at that time, Dr. Jack Noffsinger, and other key leaders, were trying to lead the church to become part of that movement, at least to welcome people of color into the church and embrace them as brothers and sisters in Christ, but also to speak up for what was right. There was significant resistance, as one would expect, given cultural patterns and teaching, even within the

church, that perpetuated racism. But this very courageous man stood up and said he understood how people felt, he was raised to think that way too, and he couldn't speak for anyone else, but somewhere deep down he knew those feelings were not pleasing to his Lord. So, he wanted to listen to what their pastor was trying to say and where God might be leading them. It completely changed the debate and the future of that church. Sometimes it takes a little courage to call us to listen.

What do we struggle most to hear that we know deep down is right? Something about the value of people who are different from us, but we have been taught to hate or dismiss? Something about the word of forgiveness we are called to speak to a person we would rather punish with our hostility or silent judgment? Something about our calling to share more of our abundance? Something about some habit or pattern of thought that is getting in the way of our contentment and faith?

Sometimes we really aren't sure what God is saying to us. In those cases, we need practices of discernment like those we have named — prayer and the help of trusted friends and guides. But often we know deep down what God is saying. No matter how long we have closed our ears in resistance, it is still possible to hear. With a little courage and in the light of resurrection hope, it is still possible to hear. Peter doesn't really listen to Jesus' teaching about suffering and sacrifice, which lies at the very heart of his message, until after Jesus dies and is raised, but he listens then, so much so that he follows this same path.

The good news for us is that we already know the end of the story. Resurrection light shines through every narrative of suffering. Transfiguration is not an outlier, it is a central theme. Thus, we can see who God is and we can listen to the teachings of Jesus, truly listen, even when it is something we don't want to hear.

That is a perspective on transfiguration we can embrace, a genuinely hopeful word in this time of so much despair, a word to carry us through Lent and beyond.