

A GLIMPSE OF REALITY

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, one of those turning points when we veer in a new direction in the church year. You could argue that everything that has happened in the church year so far has been working up to today: All that waiting in Advent, the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas time, and the many small revelations of God's majesty throughout Epiphany have been working up towards this, the day on a mountain top when Jesus is seen at least for a moment as who he is really is—human and yet encased in a most unworldly light—God with us and for us here and now and forever. Amen.

As soon as this mysterious moment happens, it's over and we begin the serious journey of Lent—the six weeks leading up to Holy Week and Easter. The One who is for us is out to save us, and that can only happen down the long road to the capital city where a cross stands waiting outside town. The story of the transfiguration is one of the strangest in the Bible, in part because outside of the movies, none of us is likely to have seen anyone transfigured before.

We've seen changes in people. A few years ago, while I was living in Baltimore, I participated in a weight management program at Johns Hopkins Hospital. During the course of the weekly meetings, I was able to observe the transformations in people who had come to Hopkins to take part in the special diet developed there for seriously overweight folks. It's part of a regimen that includes behavioral adjustments and daily exercise. When people start the program, they're often pretty sedentary. You can see it in the way they walk: slowly, uncomfortably, stopping now and then to rest, often looking as though they were in pain. After a month or so, they look about the same, but they are moving faster, more confidently. After a few months, the ones who stick with it are shadows of their former selves, wearing new clothes to go with their new bodies, some challenging themselves by signing up for 5- and 10-K runs. I was motivated in my own fitness efforts by watching these people succeed, doing something life enhancing and hard. It is dramatic. It is inspiring. It is transformation and change. But transfiguration is something else again.

We can imagine what transfiguration might look like because of what we've seen in the movies. Through modern special effects, film makers now have the ability to portray instantaneous physical transfigurations for us; but when they do, almost always the script calls for the character to be disclosed as a worst self, a monster hidden within. This is the very opposite of the revelation of a glorious shining image of God, which our faith says is our truest self. We've seen on the screen all manner of humans revealed to be evil aliens, an angry hulk, humans turned insect or animal. The single cinematic example I can think of, of a character becoming transfigured in the biblical model, happens off

screen in *Lord of the Rings* when the wizard Gandolf the Grey is transformed through suffering and triumph into Gandolf the White. Tolkien, author of the books on which the movies were based, was a devout Christian, and he was definitely relying on a biblical framework when he had Gandolf emerge from his exile with shining prophetic face in white, white robes, with white hair and beard. The film makers did the gospels proud when they shrouded his entrance in a cloud of blinding white light. One critic said it looked as though Gandolf had been to a really great salon.

How strange that a central piece of our own biblical story has to come to back to us in a movie in order for us to get a glimpse of what it might have been like on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured.

The story of the transfiguration is found in three of the four gospels. We read it every year, and every year the three disciples who witness the moment tremble and gape. Each year Peter volunteers to make the glory permanent, as it were, by building three “dwellings” for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah right up there on the mountaintop, even though he is so overcome with fear, he doesn’t know what he is saying.

Several features work together in this story to identify Jesus with God’s own majesty. The “high mountain” harks back to stories of Moses’ commission on Mt. Horeb and the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. The blinding brightness of Jesus’ clothes is a replica of God’s agent in the Old Testament Book of Daniel where the “Ancient One” was dressed in clothes as “white as snow”¹—an unearthly white. The appearance of Moses and Elijah connects Jesus with Israel’s two most important prophets. The overshadowing cloud is the same as the divine presence in the cloud of the Exodus and at Sinai.

I said earlier we had not seen transfigurations before, but that is not really so. If you spend any time with children, you have seen transfigurations on their faces. How about that moment of amazement when a small child with a new toy learns that by pushing this, that happens, not just once but every time! Or that instant when some movement that was once mystifying is suddenly easy to perform. I saw such a look on the face of a two-year old once when he took a toy kangaroo from its stuffed mother’s pocket for the first time and then put it back, saying mommy and baby over and over and over again with delight. Or what about the look on an art student’s face when she really *sees* a painting by Fra Angelico for the first time. She’s no longer looking as she once looked. She appears struck, changed by what she saw; and it changes you, too, looking on, to realize how deeply moved she is. There is no going back from such moments when new things have been mastered, no matter how small. Fredrick Buechner says we have all seen transfigurations like that, fleeting instants when a human face is transformed by understanding or beauty or joy.

Jesus’ transfiguration, too, is a momentary glimpse of something permanent that is yet to come. The disciples on the mountain top also know at some level that what they’ve seen can’t be unseen. Maybe that’s why Peter wants to fix it there and house it. What has happened up there on the mountain top was real, and perhaps at some level he

¹ Daniel 7:9.

is beginning to see that what we live day-to-day at present is not permanent. The woes of the present world are what is transitory, not the shining mountain top moment.

How about you? Can you fathom that the scene on the mountain top is what is real and that what we live day-to-day at present is the thing that is not permanent?

Some time ago I heard an interview on NPR with an amazing man—a man who makes me believe that what this text says about what is real and what is not is true and that what is real is the power we have for love and reconciliation and healing. His name is Father Greg Boyle, and he works with gangs in the neighborhoods of Los Angeles. He has worked there for well over twenty years. In his work he has seen things that might make anyone give up hope. He has buried many teenagers who were victims of gang warfare. He has watched mothers bury not one but all their sons. He has sat by beds of shooting victims and beating victims in hospitals, some of whom never recover. He says mass in 25 jails, but he has also started a business that employs ex-gang members, since kids coming out of prison who are tattooed from head-to-toe are not exactly what employers have in mind when looking for people to man their counter or their cash register. So he started a silk-screen t-shirt factory, and he employs kids there.

In the factory kids from rival gangs work side-by-side. “Usually,” says Father Boyle, “when a kid begins and is told there will be former members of rival gangs at work beside him, the kid will say, ‘Well, I just won’t talk to them.’ But after a time and a short time at that, they do begin to talk, and they get to know each other. And the old label of enemy or rival gives way to the name co-worker and sometimes friend.” The interviewer asked Boyle if he had met kids who he knew would be hopeless to try and help, and he said every time he thought he’d met a kid he could never reach, they, too, turned out to be people who wanted regular lives and homes and families and freedom from what they had known in gangs. She asked him if he talked about the gospel with these kids. “Not really,” he answered. “It’s more important,” he said, “to live as if the truth were true, to go where love has not yet arrived, choose to stand with the folks that God chooses to stand with.”

Then Father Boyle told the story of “the desert monks centuries ago who, whenever they were greatly distressed or despondent, would repeat just one word over and over again to themselves. The word wasn’t Jesus,” said Boyle. “It wasn’t love. The word was *today*. I understand that mantra. It keeps you here; it keeps you facing the person who’s facing you; it keeps you present to God revealed magnificently in front of you.”²

The disciples reacted to this revelation on the mountaintop with fear, but Jesus commanded them to “get up, and do not be afraid.” Then Jesus led them back down the mountain—back down to their calling to follow him.

What does this mean for us? First, like Peter, we are often unaware of which visions we are able to see. Scientists point out that our physical vision is limited, not just by our farsightedness or nearsightedness, but by our brain’s selective interpretation of what we perceive. For example, we can miss the repetition of a word in a sentence; we

² Father Greg Boyle, *Fresh Air from WHYY*, February 17, 2004 (accessed online at <http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=1679889&m=1679890>).

can see only a few dots on a chart at a time, even when there are many; we mistake changing colors depending on their surroundings.

Similarly, our spiritual vision can be unreliable, as Peter's was. His embrace of the transfiguration is surrounded by multiple equivocations. He declares Jesus the Messiah, then rebukes Jesus for naming the suffering ahead. Later he will proclaim his unending loyalty to Jesus, and then deny that he ever knew him. We are prone to this as well. We welcome accolades and resist painful chiding, spinning into cognitive dissonance to avoid it. We thrill at victories and glory, and then avoid the necessary challenges that face us along the way. Selective sight is not new. How much we will miss if we close our eyes to revelation, both of welcomed blessings and needed correction!

Second, the transfiguration reminds us that when God comes near to us, it changes everything. Suddenly, the disciples saw Jesus not only as a wise teacher or courageous leader, but as the fulfillment of God's messianic promise. Now they saw Jesus not only as a courageous truth-teller to the powerful, but as the one who carried the same divine Word spoken to Moses and Elijah. Now they saw Jesus not only as one who walked the road of life with them, but as one who stood, like Moses and Elijah, on the mountaintop, in that sacred thin place where the veil is lifted between heaven and earth. The transfiguration changed not only their view of Jesus; it transformed them. So it is with us.

On April 3, 1968, the great twentieth century prophet Martin Luther King Jr. stood at the Mason King Church of God in Christ headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee. King was in Memphis to plead for peace during a violent sanitation workers strike. He had not planned to speak; he did not come prepared with notes. Nevertheless, he addressed a crowd weary of the challenges they were facing: endemic racism, a costly war, and unjust labor and housing practices. He closed with these memorable words:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live—a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned with that now. I just want to do God's will. He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*³

King had no way of knowing that his life would end the next day. But thank God for the courage and faith of his mountaintop revelation that allowed Dr. King to keep going back down the mountain into the trenches of political, racial and economic danger.

Who knows what we might be called to do at any time? Who knows what courage we might need to face injustices, speak encouragement, accompany the vulnerable, or challenge corrupt powers? May we be blessed with epiphanies that open our eyes to God's presence with us still—and may we be transformed by what we see.

³ Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop." Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968, in *Say It Plain: A Century of Great African American Speeches*, by American RadioWorks,

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.