

Exodus 24:15-18; 1 Kings 19:8-13

March 5, 2023

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Luke 9:28-36

Second Sunday of Lent

**A GOSPEL ITINERARY FOR LENT
THE MOUNTAIN
“Shine, Jesus, Shine”**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Writing about “mountaintop experiences,” the Dutch Catholic priest and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said, “At some moments we experience complete unity within us and around us. This may happen when we stand on a mountaintop and are captivated by the view. It may happen when we witness the birth of a child or the death of a friend. It may happen when we have an intimate conversation or a family meal. It may happen in church during a service or in a quiet room during prayer. But whenever and however it happens we say to ourselves: ‘This is it ... everything fits ... all I ever hoped for is here.’ This is the experience that Peter, James, and John had on the top of Mount Tabor when they saw the aspect of Jesus’ face change and his clothing become sparkling white. They wanted that moment to last forever. This is the experience of the fullness of time. These moments are given to us so that we can remember them when God seems far away and everything appears empty and useless. These experiences are true moments of grace.”¹

Perhaps you’ve had your share of mountaintop experiences – religious or otherwise – those times when you feel (more than think) that you are part of something bigger than yourself or you realize a truth or insight that no amount of logical reasoning or practical experience could lead you to. From a particular religious perspective, as one source says, “This expression has originated from the Bible because of the dealings God had with His people on various ‘mountain-tops.’ So the phrase has come to mean a moment of transcendence – or epiphany; and in particular an experience of significant revelation given by God.”²

I’ve certainly had my share of mountain-top experiences, at summer camp and youth retreats and in worship services or in the beauty of God’s creation. But I’ve never had a mountain-top experience such as the one Peter, James, and John had, and I doubt I ever will. It’s not that I’m a pessimist or have little faith in what God can do. Rather, the transfiguration mountain-top experience was intended for Peter, James, and John as God revealed to them some more about who Jesus is and what Jesus does.

Which, of course, begs the question, “So what does this story have to do with us?” In his commentary on the gospel of Luke, Fred Craddock, a preeminent preacher and teacher of preachers, says there are certain stories in the Bible, such as Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, to which we cannot draw an easy parallel with our own lives, no matter how significant the event might be for us. Here is Craddock’s advice to us preachers: “The preacher or teacher might be better advised to hold [these stories] (*sic*) before the listeners in their full extraordinariness rather than reduce them to fit the

contours of our experiences. To be led by a . . . pastor to the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, to be helped to sense its significance for Jesus and three apostles, and to be left there for a while in awe of its mystery and power might finally influence life in more ways and in more depth than interpretations that reduce the text to lessons that assume ‘this is the way life is for us today.’”³

Inspired by Fred Craddock’s advice and not wanting to “explain” the Transfiguration (who can?), I hope I can lead you to the foot of the mountain, sense the significance of this event for Jesus and the disciples, and leave us all there for a while in awe and wonder, so we can discover the meaning and power of this story for our own lives on this Lenten journey of faith. Perhaps we can be inspired by how other believers have discovered the meaning and power of the Transfiguration story, through art, music, and spiritual direction.

ART

Among other Christian traditions, the Greek Orthodox Church celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6. Also, that tradition makes use of religious icons which are paintings used to reveal more about the heavenly realm than the earthly, and to teach about the faith. Here is one such Greek Orthodox icon of the Transfiguration.



And here is a description of the icon:

Christ is the central figure, literally and spiritually. He blesses with his right hand while he holds a scroll with his left. The halo above his head is inscribed with the Greek word $\omega\nu$ which mean, “The One Who Is.” The prophet Elijah stands on Jesus’ right, the law-giver Moses on his left. They both are bowing and raising their right hands. According to tradition, Moses and Elijah represent how the law and the prophets pointed to the coming of the Christ. In Luke’s story, they talk with Jesus about his coming “exodus” or departure, meaning his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. At Christ’s feet you see Peter, James, and John. James is on the right, trying to cover his eyes. John is in the middle, prostrate on the mountainside. Peter is kneeling and making a plea to Jesus Christ, perhaps about building the three booths. It is noted that the clothes of the three disciples are in “disarray” because of their indescribable experience on the mountain, perhaps symbolic of their terror.

Here’s how the Greek Orthodox Church describes the use of this icon: “The icon of the feast directs our attention toward the event of the Transfiguration and especially to the glory of God as revealed in Christ. This event came at a crucial point in the ministry of our Lord, just as He was setting out on His journey to Jerusalem. He would soon experience the humiliation, suffering, and death of the Cross. However, the glorious light of the Resurrection was revealed to strengthen His disciples for the trials that they would soon experience.”⁴

MUSIC

Our opening and closing hymns this morning call to mind the transfiguration of Jesus in all of his glory.

“Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, I want to see you high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory. Pour out your power and love as we sing ‘Holy, holy, holy.’”

“As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness; ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell your story. Shine on me; shine on me. Shine, Jesus, shine; fill this land with the Father’s glory.”

Around here, one of our favorite composers is Pepper Choplin. He wrote “This Is My Beloved Son,” which the Lorenz Publishing Corporation describes as “a moving account of the Transfiguration experience. The anthem encompasses the dynamic spectrum as it recounts God's boundless love for Jesus and, subsequently, for us.” Here are the lyrics:

*Long, long ago, the prophets spoke to ancient generations.
But in these days, God shows His ways and through the Son He’s spoken.
The Son is in God’s likeness, in glory and in brightness, in high authority.
You are my Son, beloved one, you are my first begotten.
The heav’ns you made, your hand has laid the very earth’s foundation.
The Son is in God’s likeness, in glory and in brightness, in high authority.
The Son, your sins has lightened,
He sits upon the right hand of pow’r and majesty.
The first begotten One, this is my high and holy Son.*

*On earth one day, John, Peter, James followed Him up a mountain.
Before their eyes, His face would shine with light as bright as morning.
His garment shone and brightened.
The disciples were so frightened, their faces on the ground.
A bright cloud overshadowed them, a voice came forth to tell them,
“Now listen to this one, for this is my beloved Son!”*

FINALLY, SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Do you know about “thin places”? The Celtic tradition calls them “places where that so-called ‘veil’ that separates the earth and heaven, the ordinary and the sacred, the human and the Divine, becomes so thin, so translucent, that one gets a glimpse of the glory of God. It is those times and places in our lives where God’s Presence becomes almost palpable and where we cannot help but be transfigured into what God calls us to be.”⁵

Where are your “thin places”? For many Presbyterians, Montreat Conference Center is the quintessential “thin place” and, it just so happens, is up in/on the mountains of Western North Carolina. But your thin place doesn’t have to be up on a mountain. One of my “thin places” is Cedar Cross Retreat Center, just north of Louisburg, North Carolina. Maybe your “thin place” is at the beach or in a particular sanctuary or on a trail in the woods. Most, if not all of the time, your “thin place” becomes your “thin place” because God pulls back the veil and not because you do anything in particular. Because of that, you might find your thin place in the most unexpected places.

Here is how one blogger describes the Transfiguration experience as a “thin place” *par excellence*: “Thin places. . .transform our lives. The veil parts and we know ourselves to be different. We and our whole world now stand in a different light. That is what happened to Peter, James, and John. Jesus led them to a thin place, a place where human ears would hear God’s voice, human eyes would see divine light, and human life would be enveloped in the cloud of God’s presence. . .They came face to face with the Real – the holy. It was not simply an outer experience, one that could be tasted, touched, smelled, seen, or heard. It was rather an experience of inner transformation, one that left them silent. Instead of talking about what they saw and heard they would become that which they encountered. The light they saw in Christ was in them. The veil had parted and they beheld the archetypal beauty of their own creation in the image and likeness of God. But this is not simply a story about Peter, James, and John. It is descriptive of Christ’s encounter with all humanity. We too are called to the thin places. We too are invited to step through the parted veil. Transfiguration is all around us. Jesus is always leading us to the thin places of our life.”⁶

In both Bible studies this week, we talked about the rather strange ending to this Transfiguration story: “And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.” (Luke 9:36) We wondered, “Why didn’t Peter, James, and John tell everybody they met what they had seen and heard up on the mountain?” We came up with these two answers: (1) Who would have believed them? and (2) They probably

needed some time to wrap their heads around the whole experience before they even knew what to say.

A third possibility occurred to me. In pastoral care training, we talked about “who owns the silence.” Many people are uncomfortable with silence, so the tendency is to fill the space with our own voices, ideas, suggestions, plans, etc. But if someone shares his or her pain or some noteworthy experience and then falls silent – and you are waiting for their response – the silence belongs to them. If you interrupt the silence, you just might cut off the very thing the other person needs to share.

Perhaps Peter, James, and John were simply “honoring the silence” after being overwhelmed in the thin place on the Mountain of Transfiguration, caught up in the cloud, bedazzled by Christ’s glory. Perhaps they “kept silent and told no one any of the things they had seen” because they were taking seriously – **really** seriously – what the voice out of the cloud had told them, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Most of the time it’s hard to listen – **really** listen – when you’re doing all of the talking.

As we follow this “Gospel Itinerary for Lent,” let us listen – **really** listen – to Jesus and follow him where he leads us.

“Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, I want to see you high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory. . . As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness; ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell your story. Shine, Jesus, shine.”

Let us pray: Almighty God, your Son was revealed in majesty before he suffered death upon the cross. Give us faith to see his glory. Strengthen us by his grace that we may be changed into his likeness. Open our hearts to the transfiguring power of the cross that we may walk the path of discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Henri Nouwen, “The Mountaintop Experience,” December 19, 2018, The Henri Nouwen Society at www.henrinouwen.org.

²“Mountain-top experiences,” at www.wordatwork.org.uk

³Fred B. Craddock, Luke (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 132-133.

⁴www.goarch.org/transfiguration.

⁵Rev. Shelli Williams, “A Thin Place,” February 10, 2021 at www.dancingtogod.com.

⁶Father Mike Marsh, “Thin Places, Veils, and Transfiguration,” February 15, 2010 at www.interruptingthesilence.com.