

“Transfiguring Light”

Scripture: Luke 9:28-36

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Luke 9:28-36: ²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² 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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶ 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.

A ministry by the name of Fred Craddock was fond of telling the story or tall tale of the young pastor visiting an elderly woman in the hospital. The pastor finds the woman to be quite ill, gasping for breath, and obviously nearing the end of her life. In the midst of tubes, bags, and beeping medical machines, the pastor says, “What would you like me to pray for today?”

The patient responds, “That I would be healed.”

The inexperienced pastor gulps, then prays: “Lord, we pray for your sustaining presence with this sick sister, and if it be your will, we pray she will be restored to health and to service. But if it’s not your will, we certainly hope she will adjust to her circumstances.” A sound prayer on the circumstances!

But immediately after the pastor puts an amen on this safe prayer, the woman opens her eyes and sits up in bed. Then she throws her feet over the side and stands up, and before the pastor can react, the woman walks over to the door, pulls it open, and strides down the hospital corridor. The last thing the pastor hears before she disappears are the words “Look at me, look at me. I’m healed.”

The pastor pushes his mouth closed and slowly walks down the stairs and out to the parking lot. There is no sign of the former patient. He opens his car door, and stops. He touches his still-racing heart and looks up to the heavens, and says, “Please don’t ever do that to me again.”

Now our laughter or at least smile at this story is that of recognition. We live in a world that demands that we know how things really work. Don’t give me superstitious legends. Don’t even suggest that I could do spells like Harry Potter or wiggle my nose like Samantha in *Bewitched*. We need to know the way of the world.

So people of faith, confronting the winter storm that may be coming, will go to the grocery store to stock up on groceries—we don’t expect to multiply the last two pieces of bread and that can of tuna like Jesus did with the loaves and fishes. People of faith learn to swim—none us can walk on water (unless it is frozen!). And thank goodness, people call the doctor when they get sick...I do not get many calls to do healings!

We live in a world where it is wise to know how things “really” work. However (a big “however”), we often begin to live as if we know how the world “really” works. And we live in world that has no place for God. As one teacher and author has put it, people of faith start living as “functional atheists.” We give lip service to faith but live as if we had no faith. We pull what we might call a “Thomas Jefferson” and ignore all the things that we cannot repeat or control or manage.

One of the great leaders of the American dream of nationhood was, of course, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was the primary author of our Declaration of Independence, which contains that theological or faith language that we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Although Jefferson clearly thought theologically—in terms of God, the Creator—what is often not recalled is that Jefferson produced his own gospel story of Jesus. He literally took a razor and cut out the parts of the Jesus story that were repeatable. He pasted these parts together into his gospel of Jesus. In other words, Jefferson kept what Jesus taught—after all, we could repeat what Jesus words. But he left out the miracles—because we could not repeat Jesus’ miracles.

Our story today, the Transfiguration Story, is one that Jefferson left out. The Transfiguration...this unveiling of the glory of Jesus—was not for him a repeatable event, a manageable event. It was simply superstitious fiction. Look at the artistic rendering on the front of the bulletin—Hollywood special effects could probably make that happen, but it is not something that you run into each day. And that was Jefferson’s criteria—what we can repeat and experience regularly. That’s only thing to which he would pay attention. There was no place for God in our story...in our real history.

Consider, in contrast, a couple of other historical figures: Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. You may recall that in the 1800s, Fredrick Douglass and Sojourner Truth were freed African-American who raised their voices against the inhuman institution of slavery (an institution that was supported by faithful members of this congregation at the time, to our shame—some heritage is not worth repeating and being proud of!). There was a great moment in history when Fredrick Douglass was speaking to an audience in Boston in 1852. In this particular speech, Douglass listed all the horrible expressions that went with slavery. He lamented all the people who stood by while this suffering continued. In fact, his own speech began to wear him down; he began to despair. He lost all hope before an audience that was gathered to be supportive of his cause. The world was just too evil and unfair and painful. And in the silence of his despondency, when he could not say another word, another voice was heard. On the podium was Sojourner Truth, another freed-African American, she rose and spoke forcefully: “Frederick, is God dead?” “Fredrick, is God dead?” she asked. Is God not a part of your hopes and dreams?

Those words, “Is God dead?”, are etched on the gravestone of Sojourner Truth in Battle Creek, Michigan. Without knowing this story, many a person has had to wonder about the intent and meaning of this question. Grammatically, this question is called a “polar question.” Polar questions expect a yes or no answer. Are you hungry? Are you cold? Are you over 21? However, some polar questions expect only one answer. Some polar question emphatically give us one only one answer. You know one of the most familiar ones— “Is the pope Catholic?” One answer is demanded. Or, on the negative side, “Are you deaf?” Or, the one I can hear in my father’s voice in my mind, “Are you stupid?” Sojourner Truth’s question falls into this latter category—a polar question with only one expected answer: No, Frederick, God is not dead.

This morning we read this story of Jesus shining with light that is beyond this world. Moses and Elijah, two great figures of Israelite history, stand with him. Is this symbolic of Jesus' connection to the story of Israel? Yes, but it is more. It is that experience of intermeshing of the Kingdom of God with our lives. It is that intersection of the divine and earthly in a way that astonishes and terrifies us. This intersection—this coming together of the earthly and divine—is not something that we can manufacture or manage. It is what is called a “mystical experience.” That’s what is happening here...a mystical experience that no one can control or box up. Although Peter does make the offer to build some booths, some permanent dwellings, to house this experience, his offer does not even rate a rejection. Luke, the gospel writer, simply chalks it up to his ignorance. Peter does not even know what to say.

Mystical experiences are the most frightening part of our faith story. I have been helped in my own faith journey by a spirituality model called the “Spirituality Wheel.” This model was the theme of last year’s congregational retreat. This model for faith suggests that our faith journey has four parts: matters of the mind, matters of the heart, matters of action, matters of awe and mystery. We can work at things of the mind—we can get an education. We can have some influence in the matters of heart—music, environment, companionship, even just time can shape the heart. We can do things that are faithful—just jump in and get involved...from making hygiene kits for Haiti, to helping with Family Promise and our guests this week, to living up to our baptismal promises on behalf Harper and all other children. Matters of the mind, heart, and action—we have a real role to play. But awe and mystery simply overtake us. And so often, we do not have room for mystical experiences. We simply want to manage our lives without God.

One of my favorite preachers, Tom Long, tells of working with a congregation one summer while he was in seminary. The supervising pastor assigned him to get to know some families in the congregation, including one family with a number of children, the youngest of whom he called “Robert.” Robert was born with cerebral palsy. Tom Long describes visiting with the family and found them to be lively and active, telling stories, laughing, enjoying each other. The whole family, he said, seem to be bathed in a circle of light—all except Robert. Robert stood aside, in the shadows, outside the circle.

On one visit, Tom Long happened to come when only Robert’s mother was there. In the course of their conversation, she told him of a recent, remarkable experience. She said: “Here I was knitting and Robert was standing in the hallway, watching me from distance. Then I felt strange shift in the room and it made me look up at Robert in the hallway. I saw Jesus with arms around Robert’s shoulders.” When she looked away and look back, she saw only Robert. “For the first time since he was born,” she said, “I saw my son already healed in the power of God.”

Tom Long gives two reactions to this event. The mother’s reaction was ethics. She got active in the community and in the schools for programs for those with disabilities. She became a voice and force for change. Some of the programs she pursued are still going today, forty years later. That’s how Robert’s mom processed that vision. That was one reaction; the other reaction was that of Tom Long himself, this fresh young seminary student, who had one quarter of clinical pastoral education, a seminary training process with large doses of personal analysis and psychology. Here was his reaction: “She was feeling guilty about her child. She projected her failings through her

symbol system of the Christian faith. She was just working through her personal issues.” In other words, said Long, “I reduced the vision to something I could manage.”¹

Mysticism refuses to be managed. God-events keep popping up around us, but most of us (myself particularly included!) keep trying to manage them. So I want you look back again that the cover of the bulletin this morning.² Sometimes the creative souls of artists see more in a story than I see...someone who is always ready to manage rather than be overtaken by awe and mystery. Look closely at the picture. There is, of course, Jesus in the center. High, lifted up, and bathed in light. There is Moses and Elijah—Moses is on our right, the one hold tablets of the Law. Then there are three disciples—Peter, James, and John—this experience too much for them. They can’t take it in. I know that experience.

But who is the character on the left. That person is not in the story; there is no mention of anyone in else in the text. And if the picture were clearer, you would actually see two people (one is in the shadow of the one that we see clearly). But the one we can see here is whole scene in, welcoming the experience. That person is looking with clarity and intensity. Who is this person? I think it looks a lot like...you....and you....and you....and maybe even me. It looks like those who live with Sojourner Truth’s affirmation—God is not dead. God is part of my story and yours.

¹Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Westminster John Knox, 2009), pp 29-30.

² Bulletin cover included a portion of Raphael’s Transfiguration—the top half of the painting.