

**First Presbyterian Church
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With Unveiled Faces – February 7, 2016

While today's story from Luke's gospel may seem rather odd to us, for those with an understanding of Israel's history, it is quite powerful. Eight days prior to this event, at a time when the identity of Jesus was a hot topic among the local people, some thinking him to be the prophet Elijah or John the Baptist raised from the dead, Jesus had asked his disciples directly who they thought he was, and Peter answered him, "The Messiah of God." And Jesus cautioned them to keep that knowledge to themselves, because life was about to get difficult for all of them. He predicted his upcoming suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, and though he would die, he would be raised on the third day.

Eight days following this startling revelation, Jesus went up to a mountain to pray, taking with him Peter, John and James. This story of what we call the Transfiguration evokes memories of similar circumstances of what occurred when Moses descended from Mt Sinai with the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. Because Moses had been in the presence of God up on the mountain, the skin of his face was shining, a reflection of God's glory. The people were so frightened by this, that they were afraid to come near Moses. Moses had to wear a veil when he was around the people so they wouldn't fear him.

In describing this event, with the mountain top revelation, the cloud with God's voice booming forth, the shining of Jesus' face, we are expected to see Jesus as a type of new Moses – one who will bring about a new exodus. Like Moses, Jesus will free his people from bondage and deliver a new law to live by.

The arrival of Elijah and Moses to talk to Jesus affirms this event as significant for Israel. They speak with Jesus about his upcoming departure. That same Greek work for "departure" can be translated as "exodus." The departure or exodus that they are discussing refers to Jesus' upcoming death in Jerusalem. You remember what the Exodus was? When the Hebrews followed Moses out of slavery in Egypt. It's no coincidence that both the historical Exodus and now Jesus' upcoming departure, by death on the cross, are to be linked as salvation type events. Both events lead people

out of bondage – in the case of Moses, the exodus led people out of slavery in Egypt and in the case of Jesus, his exodus would free humanity from the bondage of sin. The exodus of Jesus, which is about to take place in Jerusalem, is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation. Everything that Moses and Elijah stood for was about to find completion through this exodus of Jesus. Jerusalem had earned the reputation as the city where the prophets were put to death, and now Jesus’ own destiny will deliver him there as well.

The three disciples had been napping but woke up in time to witness this odd conversation. The story mentions their drowsiness. But just as Moses and Elijah began to withdraw, Peter called out to them to stop. He knew something significant was happening and he wanted to freeze the moment and commemorate the place.

Before Jesus has a chance to respond, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and the three disciples became terrified. To them the cloud represented the presence of God, and they knew that to look upon God’s face was a death sentence. They had no idea what was happening and wondered if they would survive the encounter.

Suddenly a voice from the cloud spoke to them. “This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to Him!” Remember the story about Jesus’ baptism, when the voice from heaven proclaimed to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.” That moment had been for Jesus the inauguration of his ministry, the go-ahead from God the Father that he was on the right path. And now, here with his three closest disciples, Jesus again hears the voice. And they hear it as well. God once again affirms his path.

Like I said earlier, people were beginning to have questions about Jesus’ identity. Here we have a straightforward announcement by God. Jesus is called the Beloved Son and the Chosen one. And the disciples are commanded to “listen to him!” When the voice from the cloud had finished speaking, Jesus was alone. Moses and Elijah had departed. The representatives of the old way were gone. It was time now to listen to Jesus. Moses and Elijah, the voices from the past, certainly carried a lot of weight. But the voice from the cloud gave Jesus greater authority. He is the one to whom we must listen.

This account of the Transfiguration leads us right into the season of Lent. Ironically, the glory of Jesus Christ comes when he accepts his destiny, his journey into Jerusalem, which will lead him to the cross. This path is confirmed by God, as the

voice from the cloud acknowledges his future – a future that will include tremendous suffering and death. All of God’s glory, majesty and power is now focused on a path of affliction. While the path to the cross seems scandalous, it is in line with Jesus’ teachings of the kingdom, where power and prestige are exchanged for service and humility. Here on this mountain, Jesus accepted a course of action that would change the world forever.

Not surprisingly the disciples in this story do not understand. Jesus had told them a week before about his upcoming passion, yet they simply could not grasp it. In the story, Luke told us that the disciples were drowsy, not fully awake. Perhaps this is a metaphor for their non-comprehension. They saw Jesus’ glory, but they missed how it would play out.

Now as you know, today is called Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration is a fancy church word that simply means transformation – kind of like when a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. But as I thought about this, transfiguration really doesn’t apply to Jesus in this particular story. He did not change or transform into something different than he already was. All that changed in him was the appearance of his face and his clothing. The glory that was already within him simply shone through to his three disciples. His true nature was revealed to them.

And the word transfiguration really doesn’t apply to Peter, John and James. They don’t appear to be transformed. In fact, as the story progresses, they are pretty clueless about what was going on. They were barely awake. It isn’t until after the resurrection that they finally begin to understand. So perhaps the transfiguration, the transformation, could be about us. Will this mountain vision of Christ’s glory make a difference in our lives?

Like the disciples in this story, oftentimes we live in a state of drowsiness, just going through the motions, not fully aware of what is around us. And there are certain things that tend to keep us in this metaphoric state of drowsiness. There is intolerance or avoidance of change. If we keep our mind closed to new ideas, only focused on our version of what we think is actual, we miss much of the big picture. Closed-mindedness can lead to prejudice and bigotry and to a very narrow view of the world around us.

Another trait that keeps us from being fully awake is simple mental lethargy. Is ignorance really bliss, or does it simply turn us into couch potatoes and human

lemmings, allowing others to think for us and spoon feed us their opinions. Mental stimulation keeps our minds active and strong and able to face the big questions of life when they present themselves to us.

A third trait that keeps us drowsy is the love of ease. We have within us a kind of defense mechanism that shuts off our brains when we are faced with any sort of problem or disturbing thought. We would rather not face things that challenge us, so we attempt to ignore them in the hope that they will go away. We chase after many things that keep us in a type of metaphoric slumber, avoiding any confrontation that may interrupt the status quo of our mundane lives. As the apostle Paul tells us in the second letter to the church in Corinth, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

Jesus calls us to wake up and to see his true glory, to see past the veil over our eyes. If we listen to him and live out what he says, we will awaken to and finally understand the true nature of the kingdom of God. It's not an easy journey and it's not one we can take if we're half-asleep. When Peter suggested he build dwellings on the mountain, he wanted to stop time and live in the radiance of that particular moment. But time moves forward, and the glory of the moment fades.

The path that Jesus calls us to follow is often uncertain but we can move forward knowing that God guides our paths. The presence of God brings incredible light into our lives but does not show us everything. Clouds still linger before us, and we do not know exactly where the path will lead us, but we can travel on, knowing that Jesus Christ is our guide and has already paved the way for us.

So the question is, will we allow ourselves to be changed, transfigured, by this glorious vision on the mountain? God tells us **who Jesus is**, none other than the Beloved Son, the Chosen One. God also tells us **what we are to do**. We are to listen to Jesus. Implicit in that command is a call to action, not simply to hear his words, but to do what he says. It is when we do that, that transfiguration actually occurs.