

“The Transfiguration” – Luke 9:28-36 – March 3, 2019

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This story of the Transfiguration always comes at the end of Epiphany and takes us into the beginning of Lent. This strange story can be found in all of the gospels. Because of this, it leads me to believe that there is something important about it. Like each of the gospel writers were saying – hey, this is significant so pay attention.

It's a familiar, if not strange, story. It seems to have familiar ties with the lesson from Exodus, as we hear of the similarities of what happens to Moses when he goes up Mt Sinai to receive the law. Like Moses, Jesus goes up a mountain, but he goes to pray. He brings Peter, James and John along. And before their startled eyes, while Jesus is praying, he is transfigured. His clothes turn white, and his face begins to shine brightly. Then Moses and Elijah appear and talk with him about his upcoming exodus.

Peter seems to recognize the importance of the event so he suggests setting up some tents. Then a thick cloud overshadows them and the disciples become terrified, and a voice from the cloud announces, “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him.” Then Jesus is suddenly alone, and the scene is back to normal. No cloud, no historic figures, no shining face.

I've read this story many times over the years. I've preached on the points that tie it to the story of Moses. I've talked about how the announcement from God here is similar to the announcement from God at Jesus' baptism. I've shared how this is a transition in Jesus ministry, as he begins his trek toward Jerusalem. I've looked at the significance of the use of the word exodus and how that ties in with the freedom that the Hebrews had when Moses led them out of Egypt.

But year after year, as this story comes up again the Sunday before Lent, I search for new meaning in the text. One pastor and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, wondered if we spend too much time trying to pull meaning from the story – as we look at each individual piece in the hope of finding a bit of relevance, instead of just taking it for the mystery that it is. And others talked about the fanciful elements of the story, making it most difficult for 21st century minds to accept without a bit of skepticism. How do we keep from tossing it aside as irrelevant, because it seems too far-fetched? And still others point out the amazing images of God's glory and how it's supposed to defy interpretation and belief. Even the disciples stay silent about what they had seen, perhaps knowing that it was an impossible tale.

All great points. All worth digging into and discussing further. But someone, some commentator or blogger – I can't even remember now – mentioned that the voice from the

cloud interrupted Peter as he was talking about setting up tents. While Peter was still speaking, God cuts him off. The divine interruption. What a perfect analogy for this entire event.

So, things are going along well with Jesus and disciples. He's teaching in the synagogues and on the street, people are beginning to follow him, the disciples are starting to understand, people are getting healed of disease and exorcised of demons. Religious authorities are getting ticked off, and Jesus puts them in their place. All in a days' work. Fairly common stuff, nothing too far out of the ordinary. And we like that. We can handle that. It all makes sense.

And then one day, Jesus takes the three disciples on this strange adventure up the mountain. Suddenly nothing makes sense. Images of dead prophets. Talking to Jesus. Dead prophets talking to Jesus. A blazing bright cloud. Jesus bathed in white radiance. And even when Peter tries to insert some mundanity, with his suggestion of building comfortable dwellings, he is suddenly overwhelmed by God's presence. God breaks in and cuts him off mid-thought. And the sound of eternity booms across the mountain with a message that seems impossible, yet somehow also incredibly **right**. Something about Jesus...

But the three disciples are overwhelmed – hearts racing in fear, skin prickled with goose bumps, dropping to the ground, eyes clenched shut, fists over their ears. Fervently praying that it is all just a dream. It's not real. It can't be real. It's just a dream. It doesn't make sense...

Then silence. One eye peaks open. Nothing. It's gone. They had been weighed down with sleep after making the trek up the mountain. Maybe it was just a dream. Yes, that's it. A dream. Now back to reality. Feet planted firmly on the ground.

When God breaks in we often don't have the words to describe it. Prose cannot do it justice. This is the realm of poetry and music. And even then, the words and song often fall short.

The divine interruption often comes unexpectedly. A seeming coincidence. Or an answer when previously there was nothing but confusion. A series of random events leading to a desired outcome. A miracle that seems to defy science and rational thought. Moments of sudden clarity or inspiration.

And when the divine interruption occurs, we often say, "It was a God thing." Maybe we attempt to articulate it. But often we don't. For those of us who have experienced those interruptions, we understand our limited capacity to talk about them. Sometimes we don't

even notice God's touch upon a situation until long after, when we look at it in retrospect. It dawns on us, finally. We see God's hand all over the situation.

Did the Transfiguration occur exactly how Luke (or any gospel writer) describes it? Or is it a memory from three disciples, long after Jesus was raised and ascended into heaven. A memory pieced together from dreams and impressions, with the light of resurrection shining on it. When Peter or James or John talked about it to their grandkids, did they embellish the story a bit? Maybe so. But that's okay.

What's important is, that with Jesus up on that mountain that day, they got a taste of God's divine glory. Memorable, but hard to describe. Maybe they could have said, "It was a God moment." And we would shake our heads in agreement, knowing exactly what they couldn't describe.