

## A Glimpse of Glory

Luke 9:28-36

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on February 7, 2016]

### I

I wonder what Peter, James, and John expected when they set off with Jesus that day.

Did they expect an intimate conversation among the four of them?

Did they expect a chance to talk Jesus out of that strange, scary talk about going up to Jerusalem to suffer and to die?

Whatever they were expecting, they got much more than they bargained for up on the mountain that day.

It was a dazzling encounter with the sacred and the transcendent—  
Christ undergoing a metamorphosis before their very eyes.

For a brief moment the curtain is drawn back, and Peter, James, and John are allowed a glimpse of the glory of Jesus,  
a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God.

Most of the time, human eyes are blind to this sort of thing.

But in that moment on the Mount of Transfiguration,  
the disciples not only saw a vision;  
they also heard God's voice coming out of the cloud, saying:  
**"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him."**

### II

In the midst of that glimpse of glory, Peter has an idea:

*"Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings (i.e., tents), one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."*

I can understand where Peter was coming from.

Who wouldn't want to linger in such an experience of radiance and splendor?

But it is important to understand that mountaintop experiences are gifts,  
whole and complete in and of themselves.

Think of the moments in your life when you've glimpsed that kind of glory:

-Your wedding...

-The birth of a child...

-a glorious sunset...

-the view from Yosemite Valley

or the rim of the Grand Canyon...

-or a moment of Holy Communion.

These are the all too infrequent moments when the curtain is pulled back and the glory of God shines through.

I call moments like that "God-moments."

Such glimpses of glory are gifts from God,  
meant to be savored and enjoyed.

Because they are gifts,  
we find ourselves awed and humbled by them.

But if we were to build a dwelling to them,  
erect a frame around them and enshrine them,  
we can end up worshiping those moments or memories or persons to the extent that  
they become a hindrance, a stumbling block, or even idolatry—  
rather than unmerited gifts from God.

We choose how to respond to the mountaintop transfiguration events in our lives.

We can ruin them with "if only"—  
(if only I could stay here longer;  
if only things would never change;  
if only I could relive that experience).

We can reminisce about our experiences,

caressing and massaging them,  
as an excuse to disengage from the world.

Or we can allow them to prepare us for what God calls us to do next.

God's response to Peter is clear...it's as though God is saying:

*Jesus is more than a lawgiver like Moses,  
more than a prophet like Elijah...  
Jesus is my beloved Son...  
my chosen instrument,  
my faithful servant,  
for all the nations.*

*No tent, no dwelling, will do here!  
In Jesus, I myself have chosen to pitch a tent among my people,  
to dwell with them,  
and to restore them to myself.*

### III

In the Transfiguration, God invites us to listen in on Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah.

What were they talking about?

Luke gives us a clue.

They were talking about Jesus' departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

In other words, Moses and Elijah and Jesus were discussing Jesus' impending death.

The Greek word translated "departure" is actually *exodus*.

They were discussing Jesus' exodus or exit from the world,  
that is, his crucifixion.

With Jesus' exodus he was rescuing us, God's people, out of slavery by releasing us from all those things that have an unholy hold upon us—

work or money or fear of death—  
by placing his own blood on the doorposts of our lives.

Peter, James, and John have a chance to listen in on the conversation,  
but like them, sometimes we don't listen very well.

Sometimes we are just as hearing-impaired as the disciples.

An older gentleman by the name of Jack feared his wife, Betty, was getting hard of hearing. So Jack called her doctor to make an appointment to have her hearing checked.

The appointment was in two weeks and meanwhile the doctor told Jack there was a simple informal test that he could give. That way the doctor would have some idea of the state of her problem.

"Here's what you do," said the doctor. "Start out about 40 feet away from your wife, and in a normal conversational speaking tone, see if she hears you. If not, move 10 feet closer and keep moving closer until you get a response."

That evening, Betty was in the kitchen, cooking dinner and Jack was in the living room, about 40 feet away.

"Let's see what happens," he muttered to himself.

Then in a normal tone he said, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

No response. So, Jack moved 10 feet closer. "Honey, what's for dinner?" again Jack asked. No response.

Then Jack moved into the dining room, another 10 feet closer. "Honey, what's for dinner?" Still no response.

So Jack walked to the kitchen door, only a few feet away. "Honey, what's for supper?" But still, no response.

Finally Jack walked up right behind Betty and said, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

Finally he heard Betty say,

"For Pete's sake, Jack, for the 5th time...chicken!"

Like Jack, some of us are just hard of hearing,  
or perhaps worse, we simply don't listen.

In this moment of high drama on the mountain we listen in on Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah.

Notice that it is only after the disappearance of these two giants of the faith that God speaks.

Could it be that God wants disciples to listen to Jesus and not the voices of those from the past?

God's people need to be attuned to what God is doing in the world.

Listen to Jesus, God says.

Listen...and hear him say that he will be with us in all of the wildernesses and in all the exits and exoduses of our lives.

At the last, entry and not exit is our destiny.

"Welcome home" will be the words we hear then.

For now, we hear,

"Come, my beloved, my chosen ones—  
follow me on the road again."

#### IV

In the Transfiguration, God invites us to live our lives with a constant sense of wonder.

In his wonder-filled book, *This Sunrise of Wonder*, Michael Mayne writes this to his grandchildren:

*"If I could have waved a fairy grandfather's wand at your birth and wished upon you just one gift it would not have been beauty or riches or a long life: It would have been the gift of wonder."*

He goes on to suggest that they set their sights not on success,  
but on wonder.

Do we live our lives with a sense of wonder,  
of awe?

Those of us of a certain age know that sense of wonder and awe that comes when on a clear night we gaze into the night's sky and view the wonder and majesty of the Milky Way Galaxy.

*Atlantic Monthly* recently reported that due to the increase in light pollution all over the world, today's children and young people will never have that experience.

Can you imagine going through life without ever seeing the Milky Way Galaxy?

This, too, is part of Jesus' message on the Mount of Transfiguration.

In this glimpse of glory, Jesus is trying to give the disciples the gift of wonder,  
a sense of awe.

The great contemplative Thomas Merton described a life-changing experience in this way,

*"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs. . . . It was like waking from a dream of separateness . . . to take your place as a member of the human race. I had the immense joy of being a . . . member of the race in which God. . . became incarnate. If only everybody could realize this. But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."*

The people around us,  
the ones we've gotten used to,  
shine like the sun.

Then think about the wonder of our bodies, our very selves.

The potential of the life which we have been given is breathtaking.

When middle C is struck on the piano, the bones in your inner ear vibrate

exactly 256 times a second.

Each day you think about 50,000 different thoughts—more or less.

When you flex your hand you are using seventy different muscles.

On the surface of your body there are as many bacteria as there are people on the surface of the earth (maybe I should have skipped that one).

The mystery of your birth,  
 the mystery of the love you feel,  
 the mystery of the deepest part of you are all most improbable.  
 (Michael Mayne, *This Sunrise of Wonder*, London: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 105)

Saul Bellow once asked,

*“What if some genius were to do with common life what Einstein did with matter? Finding its energies, uncovering its radiance.”*

Each of us is capable of far more than we realize.

Sometimes people with a terminal illness discover a quality of life in their last days that has previously passed them by.

We’re all terminal—every day is a gift,  
 every moment is an opportunity.

If we will open our eyes  
 and unstop our ears,  
 then epiphanies—  
 moments of God’s glorious presence—  
 lie like unopened gifts at every turn of the road  
 and every stage of our journey.

## V

What happened when the disciples went down from the mountain?

How did they communicate what they saw and heard to those who had not been up on that mountain?

How did they share the experience with disciples who had stayed behind?

How do we communicate transfiguration or other mountaintop experiences that God gives us?

Luke tells us that *“they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things that had seen.”*

Maybe that’s our clue.

Don’t run off at the mouth about it  
or tell people that they “should have been there.”

Maybe the best way to tell the story of the transfigured Christ is by serving the people who appear in our path,  
the sick,  
the lonely,  
the hurting,  
the hopeless.

For whenever Christians heed those things Christ has said:

*“Love one another...*

*Forgive, as God has forgiven you...*

*Follow me...,”*

then all of life is transfigured,

and the glory of the mountaintop  
is brought down into the valleys of human suffering and need.

May God enable us to live with such a sense of wonder that our eyes  
will always glimpse the glory on the mountaintop,  
and our ears will always be open  
to hear the voice of the One who says,

**This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!**

Thomas Troeger said it well:

*Lord, transfigure our perception with the purest light that shines,  
And recast our life's intentions to the shape of your designs,  
Till we seek no other glory than what lies past Calvary's hill  
And our living and our dying and our rising by your will.*

Amen.