

“Mysterious Changes: Transfiguration and Discipleship”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
February 14, 2010
Transfiguration Sunday
Scripture: Luke 9:28 – 43a

The disciples almost missed it because they were “weighed down with sleep” (Luke 9:32). Peter and James and John – the three disciples we met last week as fishermen who left everything to follow Jesus – the three of them accompanied Jesus on a spiritual trip up the mountain so Jesus could pray. They were so tired they almost missed it, Luke tells us, but they stayed awake and saw something so wondrous and shot full of glory that it transformed their lives.

The mountains occupy a symbolic place in the Bible. Jerusalem itself sits on top of a mountain – in the ancient cosmology the mountain was like the umbilical cord that connected the earth to the heavens. Moses went up the mountain to talk with God. The great prophet Elijah went up the mountain where he heard God in a “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). And now Jesus goes up the mountain to pray. This is not some vacation, this is a spiritual discipline, an intentional journey, a physical mission to seek out God’s wisdom and get God’s blessing. And so Jesus goes up the mountain to pray.

During the Republican National Convention in Saint Paul back in September, 2008 – that seems so long ago now, doesn’t it – during the RNC we began a partnership with a group of people who called what they wanted to do a Peaceful Presence. A group of people who, like Jesus, recognized the importance of intentional prayer. They met in our sanctuary every hour to pray for our city, the delegates, for police and protesters. They were in fact a peaceful presence during those heated, tumultuous days. They continue to meet for prayer and meditation in our sanctuary on the first Wednesday of each month. Their idea began by studying a book called Transfiguration by the Jesuit priest, peace activist, and Red Cross coordinator of chaplains in New York City after the attacks of 9/11 -- John Dear. Not the John Deere of the tractor company. But if that helps you remember it, fine, because it is an excellent book for meditation and personal transformation – and it has guided my thoughts for today.¹

This mountain trip comes at a pivotal time for Jesus, John Dear emphasizes. He went up to the mountain “at a time when the rulers were plotting his assassination, when his disciples could not comprehend his mission, and when the darkness seemed to overcome his light.”²

Until now, “his appearance by all accounts was not newsworthy.”³ We never hear physical descriptions of what Jesus looked like in the Bible. Did he look like a mountain man? A sophisticated urbanite? Was he tall and strong, or rather weak? We hear no physical descriptions of Jesus, until now, when he arrives at the top of the

mountain. But the disciples are so sleepy by the journey that they almost miss it. Jesus goes to pray and the disciples can barely keep their eyes open.

While Jesus is praying, his face changes appearance and his clothes become dazzling white. “Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30-31).

It is a moment of clarity and confirmation for Jesus. Just eight days earlier Jesus was teaching about suffering and rejection, trying to get the disciples to understand the difficult path he faced. And now James and John and Peter see Jesus standing with the heroes of the faith: Moses, who died before seeing the Promised Land and Elijah, who legend had it, was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1, 11). And the three are talking about how Jesus will accomplish his departure at Jerusalem.

And in what serves as a great confirmation, an affirmation of Jesus’ mission and identity, a cloud came upon the mountain and overshadowed them. And out of the cloud they hear a voice, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35). If Jesus had any doubts about whether he was on track with God’s plan for his life, the conversation with Moses and Elijah, followed by the heavenly voice served as a powerful affirmation. If the disciples had any doubts that Jesus was self-destructing, the voice from the cloud would echo in their memory long past the events of Good Friday.

The confirmation of his identity propelled Jesus back down the mountain. Peter wanted to freeze time and build a permanent shrine up on the mountain, to institutionalize the moment, but he missed the point altogether. The transfiguration moment was not to control God, but to encourage Jesus on and help the disciples better understand as he ministers to all and marches onward to Jerusalem. His identity and mission confirmed, Jesus goes back down and is thrust back into ministry.

When they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not” (Luke 9:37-40).

Back to work. No dazzling white clothes. Face back to normal. Moses and Elijah no longer visibly cheering him on. Back to the crowds, who expected so much from him. Back to the other disciples, who can’t solve the problems that arise. Back to work, teaching and healing, revealing God gradually rather than in one blinding flash of dazzling light.

There are many strands within this story that demand our attention. But I think the unstated story within the story is about how the disciples get it themselves – how they find themselves transformed into Christ’s image.

The Christian mystic Henri Nouwen once wrote,

Maybe we do not always fully recognize our mountaintop experiences. We write them off as insignificant and trivial compared with all the important and urgent things we have to do. Still, Jesus wants us to see his glory, so that we can cling to that experience in moments of doubt, despair, or anguish. When we are attentive to the light within us and around us, we will gradually see more and more of that light and even become a light for others. We have to trust that the transfiguration experience is closer to us than we might think.⁴

So, how do we transfigure ourselves, how do we transform? There are some who just seem to embody the ways of Jesus so easily, so naturally. For the rest of us, it does not come so easily. For the rest of us, some suggestions about how to transform our lives so as to align with God's will and follow in Christ's ways. Four suggestions, that all circle back to one theme.

Suggestion number one is from a pastor and author named Martin Copenhaver, who recently wrote,

I now think I understand why Jesus tells his followers to act in particular ways, regardless of how they feel at the time. He says turn your cheek, pray for your enemies, pray then like this. He focuses on actions, not because interior dispositions are unimportant but because most often we act our way into a new way of thinking and feeling, rather than the other way around.⁵

Suggestion number 2, for those who find themselves paralyzed by not having a complete and systematic theology is from Thomas G. Long,

A common misunderstanding is to think that talking about faith means getting our belief system all worked out in advance before we open our mouths. When we speak about our faith, we intuitively think that what we are doing is finding the language to say what we already know we believe . . . but things are actually more complex than this. . . We talk our way *toward* belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply. Putting things into words is one of the ways we acquire knowledge, passion, and conviction. . . In short, we are always talking ourselves into being Christian.⁶

Sometimes suggestions are better made indirectly through stories. Once upon a time, there was a wicked man who loves a virtuous girl. The man knows that he cannot hope to woo her if he approaches her undisguised, so he dons the mask of a saint. Sure enough, the girl falls in love with the man – or perhaps it is more accurate to say that she falls in love with the saintly mask. Years later, a spurned lover of the hypocrite shows up in town and discovers the deception. So she challenges the hypocrite. Take off your mask in front of your beloved and see if she still loves you. Take off your mask and show your face for the ugly, repulsive thing it is. When, after considerable protest, (and no small amount of blackmail threats) he drops his mask, he discovers what he could not have anticipated: under the mask of the saint his face has become transformed. It is the face of a saint.⁷

Max Beerbohm titled his story “The Happy Hypocrite,” for clearly it was the man’s intention to deceive. . . . Nevertheless after years of pretending to be saintly, he surprised even himself that the mask had become reality.

Or, as Mary Karr, wrote about trying to change from a questioning raging alcoholic to a sober, faithful parent, “Fake it till you make it.”⁸ (Mary Karr, *Lit*, 217)

On this Valentines’ Day, some of these lessons just might apply to love as well. I once heard a rabbi here in Saint Paul refer to a saying that “marriage sustains love. Not vice-versa.” That relationships and the daily practices of getting along can sustain love, which goes against our Disney and Hollywood culture that says it is dewy-eyed love that makes a marriage work. So maybe some of the same lessons about transfiguration apply here as well. On days when we don’t feel much like loving, or are in doubt about the how love can last for a lifetime, focus on actions, put on a mask of love, fake it till we make it. Something to think about on this Valentines’ Day.

Up on the mountain, Jesus’s clothes became dazzling white and his face shone with glory. And the darkness has not overcome that light. When our ways grow dark and our vision dims, Jesus will be our flashlight⁹. When others need help, we can reflect a bit of that light and glory, and let our lights shine before others.¹⁰ Shine in our hearts, Jesus, for we want to walk as a child of the light.¹¹

Amen.

¹ John Dear, *Transfiguration: A Meditation on Transforming Ourselves and the World* (New York: Image Book published by Doubleday, 2007) 65.

² *Ibid.*, 44.

³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁵ Martin B. Copenhaver “Made Better Than I Am” in Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009) 64-65. Emphasis added.

⁶ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2004) 6-7. Emphasis added.

⁷ This story is slightly adapted from Copenhaver, 64-65.

⁸ Mary Karr, *Lit: A Memoir*, (HarperCollins, 2009) 217.

⁹ John Dear, 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹ Two lines from the closing hymn, “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light”