

Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday

Feb. 7, 2016

Luke 9: 28-36

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A woman was drawing close to death and drifting in and out of consciousness while her daughter, Julie sat attentively by her side. Suddenly Julie's mom lifted a hand and reached out toward the ceiling and whispered, "Julie, your grandmother is here! She is so beautiful!" Julie glanced at the ceiling and looked around the room, but saw nothing. "Where is she mom? I don't see her!" The dying woman turned toward her daughter and replied, "I know you can't see her honey – she's here for me, not you!"

Have you ever had a spiritual vision or been with someone who has? Have you even wanted to? Perhaps it feels a bit spooky to contemplate such a thing. And if you or someone you know has had something they might term a "spiritual of Mountain top experience" happen, it might feel a bit too risky to share it! Would others believe you? What would they think? What do you do with this kind of overwhelming experience?"

As a pastor, I have been privileged to have a few people who have trusted enough to tell me about a vision that has profoundly impacted them. Visions like a loved one coming to them in a dream after death and letting them know that they are ok, and telling them not to feel so sad. Another told me about coming out of open-heart surgery and seeing Jesus in magnificent light sending him back to be with his family. One would think after something like this, people would want to tell everyone about it, yet many are reluctant to share their experience for fear that they might not be believed. Some have told me they are reluctant to speak about it aloud and in doing so, diminish the awe and sacred holiness they felt as a result of that vision. They just didn't have words to capture what they had experienced.

In our material world, where we are so busy and engaged with controlling whatever we are doing, visions may seem fanciful and unlikely. And what would it mean if my neighbor had a mountain top experience with God but I didn't? That sets up all kinds of distrust and discomfort! Yet, as our gospel text tells us this morning, visions are a significant way in which God's persistent presence transforms life and gives confirming strength for his children to follow.

Peter, John and James, three of Jesus' disciples, went up a mountain with Jesus to pray. Jesus prays and apparently, the disciples fall asleep. This part of the story we can relate to, for humans tend to fall asleep in the midst of prayer sometimes. But then the story becomes hard to explain, must less understand. Luke writes that while Jesus is praying, his face changes and his clothes glow with shining light. Jesus is transfigured, literally transformed with glory. Then two men, Moses and Elijah, the greatest lawgiver and prophet in Biblical history, appear in heavenly glory and talk to Jesus about what will soon unfold in Jerusalem.

Is this Biblical Science fiction? While this surreal encounter continues, the sleepy disciples awaken and witness this amazing event. It must have been both surreal and transformative, for Peter becomes so enthralled that he offers to build three tents so that this glorious encounter can continue indefinitely. How good it is to be here! Let's never go back! Jesus, Moses, Elijah and unending light...it doesn't get more exciting than this! (Luke makes a side comment here: Peter didn't know what he was talking about!)

And then, a major shift in the story: A cloud comes and covers them all with a Holy presence that commands their full attention. The disciples are suddenly afraid. The voice of God thunders from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to Him!" When the voice is gone, the two men disappear and Jesus is alone with his disciples as he was before. In stunned silence, they head down the mountain to join the others. However, they tell no one what they had seen. Strange.

What does this story of the transfiguration of Jesus mean for Peter, James and John? What does the transfiguration of Jesus mean for us today? How do we enter in and engage in the full light and glory of the one who is and always will be the living Christ? What now?

Now I have something I need to share with you. I had a vision of my own right here in this very room. Really? You might think? A vision here, at Christ the King? Well, yes. My vision happened over 25 years ago when I was grappling with a sense of call to enter the ministry. Becoming a pastor was not an easy choice for my family and me. I was a special education teacher then, and a mom to three soon to be teenage children. I was an active member of this church, helping with the youth program and singing in the choir. I often volunteered to read scripture or serve communion.

It was nearly Easter, and that Lent I had played the role of Mary Magdalene, weeping at the tomb of Jesus, and then rejoicing when he appeared to me in one of our large musical productions we did in those

days. Now granted, the role of a weeping and rejoicing Mary Magdalene was emotionally charged and dramatic, and mixed with the amazing music, and exhausting schedule of multiple performances we offered, I was perhaps more vulnerable, or shall I say, "receptive" to the sense of God's presence all around me. It was also a time when I felt very "conflicted," for you see, I felt both an urgency and a calling to enter seminary and begin studying for ordained ministry, but I didn't know how to make such a thing happen. So while my heart and spirit said, YES, YES! My head and common sense said a resounding NO! We were raising a family. We needed my income, not four years of interruption and tuition to pay. My family hadn't bargained for a change like this, how could God ask such a thing? And yet, the inner turmoil and longing for an affirmation from God was churning and growing stronger during that entire Lenten season.

It was Maundy Thursday. Three crosses were left standing above the verigos wall after the rest of the staging had been removed. And I was scheduled to help serve communion. As I walked forward to help serve that night, I was praying to God for a sign, ANY sign, to affirm that sense of call I felt. That it wasn't just a whim – or foolish dream. I looked up at those three crosses, and that's when the vision occurred.

Even now, I really don't know how to describe it. Words feel wholly inadequate. There was a force of power, filled with light and love, which came streaming down from those crosses and right toward me as I moved toward the altar that night. I then heard in my soul these words, "Shepherd My people." As I turned to face the congregation holding the communion tray, I watched many of you still in the pew this morning, and many that are no longer here, come forward with radiant faces. And I began to cry. Tears just flowed and flowed down my cheeks as I said, "this is the blood of Christ, shed for you." Pastor Steve Sampson noticed and offered me his handkerchief, but he seemed to respect my need to continue to serve. And so I did. Little did I know then, that God would grant me the privilege of being one of your pastor's someday, and that He would allow me to walk beside so many of you offering pastoral care and compassion during times of vulnerability marked by God's amazing grace.

Now sharing this vision experience, still makes me a bit unsettled, so imagine what Peter, James and John must have felt after seeing the transfiguration of our Lord, and his affirming encounter with Moses and Elijah. And imagine what it must have been like to be covered by that cloud (understood in Biblical times to be the way the presence and holiness of God came near to his people). And then imagine them

hearing God's thundering voice declare, "This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to Him!" The fact that they were silent and told no one of what they had seen makes perfect sense.

So much had happened that they could not yet comprehend. The things Jesus had said to them in Luke's gospel before their trip up the mountain were baffling. Jesus had asked them, "Who do the people say that I am?" And when they tried to answer, Jesus turned the tables on them and said, "But, who do YOU say that I am?"

Peter impulsively speaks for them all and declares, "You are the Christ of God! The Messiah coming into this world!" Up until now, Jesus had been their teacher, their master and friend. But now he steps up to become so much more! Seeing him with Moses, the prototype of what a Messiah should be by saving God's people from oppression in Egypt, parting the mighty sea, and leading them through the wilderness to a land of milk and honey, ties Jesus firmly to the Old Testament Law that defined how the Jews knew and understood God. And the prophet Elijah, whose words painted a portrait of the Messiah that would come and restore new generations of God's people, entrapped by sin and scattered to Babylon without a way back to their relationship with God, propels them into a new beginning...a New Testament in which God would do a new thing. How could they not be enthralled? What an amazing revelation. But that wasn't all. Jesus had also said that there would be a cost to follow him as Messiah, and it would involve something totally foreign to their understanding. They would need to lose their lives in order to save them, and take up a cross of suffering if indeed they were to follow him. What kind of Messiah would Jesus be? They were baffled and utterly confused as they followed their master up that mountain to pray.

No wonder what they witnessed on that mountaintop vision baffled them! For you see, it was only after the resurrection that the truth of Christ would be fully revealed and the veil of understanding lifted. "Listen to Him!" they were told. Obviously, they were not capable of following Jesus until they too were transformed by the glory that would unfold when Jesus rose again in victory forever. Listen.

As they came down that mountain and watched Jesus encounter a desperately hurting world with a renewed determination to walk the path His heavenly Father had confirmed as his mission, all they could do was listen, follow, and trust. Together with Jesus, the Christ of God, they were turning a corner from a glorious vision of hope, power and confirmation, to a frightening walk toward Jerusalem where a very real cross was

waiting. They entered that very first "Lenten" journey just as we are asked to do again today.

Maybe you too have had a vision, maybe not. It really doesn't matter. For Christ promises to show each and every one of us the way through our inadequacies; overwhelmed fears; prideful reluctance and hurting realities to that amazing vision that **everyone** can witness in the Resurrection!

"Christ, show us the way!" we pray as we turn toward a more somber, reflective time. We are called to be in constant dialogue with God, asking for the vision to notice and the strength to follow wherever Christ is leading us. As resurrection people and within our baptismal identity, resurrection hope shines forth from our shining faces and out of our hearts to carry God's vision for all humanity into a sin-sick and weary world.

Know that God continues to be present and reveal his glory in and through the living, risen Christ. For truly the one we proclaim walks with us through the rivers, that they might not overwhelm us; and into the fires that threaten, never allowing them to consume us. Christ. Show us the way!
Amen.