

## “Downward Journey” – Feb. 11, 2024

### Transfiguration Sunday (Mark 9:2-9)

*2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (NRSVUE)*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Having come through several Sundays after Epiphany, we arrived at Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration Sunday is sometimes described as an overture, the music the orchestra plays before the curtain goes up on the dramatic opera. As the overture hints at the musical themes to follow, Transfiguration Sunday presents subtle clues to the following Lenten season.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, Transfiguration Sunday bridges Epiphany and Lent in the liturgical year.

Until now, we have climbed together the mountain of the Epiphany-glory, and we are at the peak of that mountain today. Starting from this coming Wednesday, called Ash Wednesday, we will be walking downhill while we participate in Lent. Standing at the height of the hill between Epiphany Season and Lent, we reflect on the radiant transfiguration of Jesus, who invites us to climb down the Lenten journey with him.

Along with Peter, James, and John, Jesus went up to the mountain to pray. Suddenly, the appearance of Jesus changed, and his clothes became dazzling bright. Then, Elijah and Moses appeared and talked with Jesus. We can read the same story in Matthew and Luke, and if we read all three Gospel stories carefully, we can find the transfiguration story is deeply connected to the cross and resurrection. (The Gospel of Luke, especially, anticipates the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>)

Peter said to Jesus, “Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter wanted to stay forever in all

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church*.

<sup>2</sup> *Interpretation; Preaching through the Christian Year*. According to commentators, unlike the Book of Mark and Matthew that begin the transfiguration story with “Six days later,” Luke intentionally begins the story with “Eight days later,” foreshadowing the resurrection of Jesus.

these moments and emotions. At least he wanted to build memorials to hold those memories.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience that was so surprising, but delightful and meaningful that you wanted it to last forever? Although experiences vary from person to person, we sometimes have unexpected mountaintop moments in our faith journey. As Thomas Keating put it, I believe God sometimes “lifts a corner of the veil, to the mystery that is actually going on all the time.”<sup>3</sup>

While Peter wanted to set up memorials, according to Alan Culpepper, a New Testament scholar, the transfiguration story reminds us that “faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced.”<sup>4</sup> When we have had any mountaintop moment, great or small, we have experienced God's precious gift, and the best way to express our gratitude is to discern and humbly follow God's lead.

While Peter was speaking to Jesus, suddenly a cloud appeared and enveloped Peter and his companions, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” The disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus. In the Bible, a cloud often means the presence of God. When the sound of the voice died away, they saw Jesus there alone. They were speechless. The disciples kept this to themselves, at least for a while.

Instead of seeking his own glory on the peak of the high mountain, Jesus came down, walking the path leading to the cross. As Henri Nouwen said, Jesus showed us that “God’s way is not the way of upward mobility, but downward mobility.”<sup>5</sup> The transfiguration of Jesus also invites us to take up our own cross and follow his way of downward mobility, especially through this coming Lenten season leading to the day of resurrection.

As we enter the Lenten season this Wednesday, I invite you to remember John Wesley’s invitation to capture divine mystery every moment.

Wesley understood that we could truly capture the moment if we would be grateful for every moment. Whenever Wesley was asked what he would do if tomorrow

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God*.

<sup>4</sup> *New Interpreter’s Bible*.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*.

would be his last day on earth (or the Lord would return at that time the next day), his answer was always the same: "I would do the same things I am doing now." Wesley implies that when we strive first for the kingdom of God and stay mindful of God's presence and actions here and now, our every NOW moment could become a true mountaintop experience.

Peter, James, and John followed Jesus as he continued to walk the cross of love. The mountaintop moment didn't make them extraordinary human beings. We remember that after Jesus was arrested, Peter denied Jesus three times out of fear and wept bitterly over his weakness and cowardice. The disciples of Jesus often showed shortcomings, such as fear, anxiety, vulnerability, and desire for power, but they were still men and women who humbly walked Jesus' way to the end. The Bible shows that any spiritual experiences point us back to the daily tasks and struggles that give our lives meaning and purpose.<sup>6</sup>

This coming Wednesday will be Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. When a cross of ashes is marked on the forehead, we are invited to repent our sins before God, remembering that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. As we prepare for marching down the path of Jesus, especially remembering our suffering siblings near and far, I invite you to be attentive to what God is doing in your every moment. Our faith journey invites us to see God's presence and actions this day and every day, always anticipating that the best is yet to come! May God open our eyes to see God's mystery this moment and every moment of the Lenten journey. Amen!

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<sup>6</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible.*