

## Transfiguration C (3/3/2019)

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

**Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a]**

*Transfiguration is about getting perspective, about seeing things for what they are and pointing us to truths we might not otherwise perceive. There's nothing permanent or conclusive about any given experience of transfiguration. But a flash of insight, a revelation, can draw our attention to the glory of God's purpose in anything and anyone.*

There is probable cause to suspect that the world is a mostly dreary place where there is little reason to trust in goodness or beauty. Affliction and decay are rampant, and hope isn't much more than an anesthetic. Silver linings, if we're capable of seeing them at all, are thought to be a consolation, whereas the heart of the matter is generally a disappointment. "All things are wearisome," writes the author of Ecclesiastes, "more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun."<sup>1</sup>

Nothing new, nothing to inspire fresh conviction. Even Jesus finds himself in this place upon descending from the mount of transfiguration. "You faithless and perverse generation," he spits, "how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" The disciples, you see, have failed miserably in their efforts to alleviate a child's pain, the excruciating effects of possession. "I begged your disciples to cast [the spirit] out," the boy's father pleads with Jesus, "but they could not." The disciples have been helpless to heal a little one, incapable of

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:8-9.

exercising the power to bring new life from the throes of death. The reign of God is among them,<sup>2</sup> but they can't lay claim to it.

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**What good is a Messiah if his followers are powerless to join him in his project to transform the world?** Some of our kindred in the United Methodist Church are having similar thoughts this week in the wake of their church's decision to persist in denying ordination and marriage to LGBTQIA2+ members. For rank and file Methodists, the denomination is their spiritual home, the place where they've encountered Jesus, yet their hands are tied in matters related to inclusion. *I begged your disciples to gather in every member of your living body*, these grieving people might cry to Jesus, *but they could not*.

This is by no means an indictment of a particular tradition. Every community of Jesus' disciples has to wrestle with our inability to live up to his example, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>3</sup> We are certainly not in a position to point our fingers at others as we rest on our laurels; rather we ought to look around and recognize that this world often feels like the valley of the shadow of death,<sup>4</sup> and we are feeble.

The valley, of course, is downhill from the summit. And the summit is where the transfiguration takes place. This odd epiphany is not meant to simply astonish and terrify the select few who are privileged to witness it, but to give

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 17:21.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:23.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 23:4.

them an insight into Jesus' identity. The glory of God shines not only as a spectacle, but as a key to the disciples' discernment. This itinerant rabbi and healer – the one they've been following without knowing exactly why – stands among the great figures of the faith: Moses, the freedom fighter, and Elijah, the defender of God's truth. Here on the mountain appear together the three exemplary prophets, one of whom God singles out: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the fireworks come to an end, when the inevitable trek back down the mountainside is complete, the disciples have a clear directive. They are no longer a band of free agents, but agents of the reign of God, for whom their Teacher speaks and acts with authority.

It's not as though the vision on the mountain is immediately effective, however. Notice that Peter, John, and James are not suddenly emboldened by it: "They kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." And with zipped lips, they stand idly by as Jesus rebukes the other disciples for their ineffectiveness in his absence. Neither does the memory of the transfiguration prevent Peter, John, and James from misunderstanding, even disavowing Jesus as the story unfolds.

**God does not pull the disciples' strings on the mount of transfiguration, but God opens their eyes.** In a flash, God's truth is perceptible. And that truth, as difficult as it is to grasp in the moments and days that follow, points to God's redemption in and through another odd epiphany: the crucifixion and resurrection.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, the narrator, an aging Congregationalist preacher living in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, sets down an account of his life for his young son who may have little else to remember him. The Reverend Ames delights in the wonder of simply being alive, expressing awe and gratitude at even the simplest of things. As one interpreter puts it, he "manages to convey the miracle of existence itself."<sup>5</sup> By way of conclusion, the Reverend Ames reflects:

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light.... Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see.... there is more beauty than our eyes can bear... precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm.<sup>6</sup>

**Transfiguration is about getting perspective, about seeing things for what they are and pointing us to truths we might not otherwise perceive. There may be nothing permanent or conclusive about any given experience of transfiguration. But a flash of insight, a revelation, can draw our attention to the glory of God's purpose in anything and anyone. Even if we're reluctant to acknowledge it, the image of God shines in each of God's beloved. And we, like the first followers of God's Chosen One, are entrusted with that vision for the sake of all who need to see it.**

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<sup>5</sup> *Los Angeles Times Book Review*.

<sup>6</sup> 245-6.