

At the Bottom of the Mountain
Seattle First Baptist Church
March 3, 2019

Since today is transfiguration Sunday, of course I thought about starting with a Harry Potter reference. For those of you not as familiar with the 90s craze about the boy wizard and his pals attempting to defeat an evil wizard while still making good grades at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, one class that was required of Harry Potter was transfiguration. The movies depict this well: Dame Maggie Smith as a stern Professor McGonagall, teaching the second years how to turn animals into water goblets by saying “Vera Verto.” Unfortunately, Harry’s best friend Ron Weasley has a difficult time with this spell, and his water goblet is covered in fur and has a rat tail. The transfiguration of one item into another is one of the most truly magical aspects of the wizarding world, throwing into question several laws of thermodynamics as one tries to understand how an animal becomes a goblet.

This is what transfiguration does: it captures our imagination, it elicits awe and wonder, it shrouds whatever is being transfigured in mystery. And the story of Jesus’ transfiguration at the top of the mountain is no different. The disciples Peter, John and James, the inner circle of the 12 main followers of Jesus, followed their teacher to the mountain so he could pray, but find themselves very sleepy (which seems to happen an awful lot to them)...and then suddenly this event is enveloped in a cloud of unknowing, as the disciples watch Jesus’ face and clothes become a brilliant white and two ancient figures appear next to him. Peter, always pragmatic, has a bright idea as he sees Moses and Elijah conferring with his teacher. He says, “It’s good that we’re here! Let’s put up some shrines and tents so we can stay here with Moses and Elijah!” Peter is so overcome by awe at whatever is going on that he wants to stay there...and who can really blame him? In previous sermons I’ve shared that sometimes my reaction to Peter and his ilk are “silly disciples! You don’t know what you’re doing!” but here...I get it. Who doesn’t experience something so mind blowing, so heart-fulfilling that you don’t want to bottle that moment and keep it forever? That you don’t want to pitch your tent right in that time and place so you keep that feeling alive forever?

But the hard truth is, that transfigurations are tough. Not “wave your magic wand” tough like Ron Weasley thought, but HGTV tough. I have to admit that, besides Harry Potter, a guilty pleasure of mine is watching shows like What Not To Wear or Extreme Makeover: Home Edition or Fixer Upper. I love watching someone be fitted with exactly the right outfit combination, or an

interior designer explain what the marble kitchen island offers over the granite island, or a construction crew tear up ratty old carpet to reveal the hardwood floors that were there all along (!) I love those transfiguration shows that show the new life in old homes or well-worn wardrobes...”this beautiful bathroom fixture was here all along!” but I have to wonder...how long does this “perfection” last? How long does this model house stay clean? How long can all of the pillows on the perfect couch in Better Homes and Gardens stay “just so”? How long does the person wake up to do their hair in a snazzy new style every morning? And so let us wonder together about the transfiguration the disciples witness: how long do the disciples really want to stay at the top of the mountain? How long do they keep the spirit of transformation with them as they go down the mountain? Because, we all know, we cannot stay on the mountaintop forever.

Lori Brandt Hale writes, “The story of the transfiguration of Jesus loses its power if it does not include that moment when Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain. The transfigured Jesus is changed, not in essence, but in the way he is seen; he acts in and for the world accordingly. Seeing Jesus differently means seeing oneself and others differently too.” And so, following a transfigured Jesus who returns from his glory at the top of the world to the pain, suffering, anguish and despair waiting at the bottom of the mountain, we are called to be present in the world. We have to exit this sanctuary and go into a world where people are hurting, where families are broken, where patience is thin and mercy is all too rare...that’s not to say we don’t have those things within these walls, but on the mountaintop we are tempted to push “pause” and stay there. But we must return to the world, having encountered a transfigured Jesus, having witnessed the affirmation from the ancients. We must watch Jesus closely to see what he does next. And we must follow.

Many churches will hear the story of the transfiguration today and it will end at verse 36. But today, let’s follow Jesus and Peter and John and James to the bottom of the mountain. Let’s read together verse 37-43.

37 The next day, when Jesus, Peter, John, and James had come down from the mountain, a large crowd met Jesus. **38** A man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to take a look at my son, my only child. **39** Look, a spirit seizes him and, without any warning, he screams. It shakes him and causes him to foam at the mouth. It tortures him and rarely leaves him alone. **40** I begged your disciples to throw it out, but they couldn’t.”

41 Jesus answered, “You faithless and crooked generation, how long will I be with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.” **42** While he was coming, the demon threw him down and shook him violently. Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, healed the child, and gave him back to his father. **43** Everyone was overwhelmed by God’s greatness.

A parent waits at the bottom of the mountain, squinting up at the shining light atop the peak. The parent has brought their child, their only child, whose physical and spiritual health is in poor condition. The parent hoped that the disciples would cure the child with a blessing; after all, just recently the disciples were given the authority “over all demons and to cure diseases” (which we read about at the very beginning of this chapter!) But the disciples didn’t know how to help this child. Ched Myers, a Mennonite theologian and scholar, suggests that the disciples inability to heal is the real surprise and mystery of the transfiguration! He wonders what that says about how we avoid and resist “Jesus’ way of servanthood, solidarity and nonviolence,” since Jesus’ followers were given powers to confront these issues.

Heidi Neumark, pastor of a church called--no joke--Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the Bronx, describes in her memoir *Breathing Space*, a church community who kept its doors shut and locked all the time. The church’s neighborhood was poverty stricken, with addictive substances being sold and shortages of food and desperate need for affordable housing surrounding the closed-door congregation. Rev. Neumark shared about the tough, soul-searching work that church engaged in to discern how they should interact with, and minister with, their neighborhood. She writes, “When Peter and the others came down from the mountain, they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty. But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others...living high up in the rarefied air isn’t the point of transfiguration...[it was] never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.”

Sometimes we think we have to be perfect in order to make a difference. Well, bad news friends, it was *Jesus* who shone in brilliant light and glory at the top of the mountain. *We*, like Peter and John and James, are witnesses to

what God is up to in the world. Like Transfiguration Lutheran Church, we don't always choose on the side of justice, we don't always face the problems in our community head on. But let us be affirmed, as Katie Geneva Cannon reminded us, that the people we read about in Scripture all have "clay feet." They are not perfect, they are human. And that is enough. Jesus calls us to follow him up the mountain, sleepy though we may be, not knowing what comes next...*and* to follow him back down, witnessing to God's work in the world as we go.

As we celebrate Pastor Tim's 10th anniversary, many of us know Tim's favorite quotes by heart. Finish this one with me: "Never...underestimate the power of showing up." And through Tim's preaching, pastoral care, jovial laugh, thoughtful facilitation, freely-shared emotion, and deep, foundational love for this congregation and for the work of the gospel, we have seen him showing up. We have witnessed Tim never underestimate the power of showing up at the bedsides of loved ones in the hospital, at the homes of families welcoming a new baby, at meetings and rallies and marches and protests. Today we celebrate Tim's ministry among us, and all the ways that we have learned, and will continue to learn, how to show up.

And really, that's what the disciples did in following Jesus to the top of the mountain. They saw the heavenly cloud and heard the otherworldly voice affirming Jesus' as God's Chosen Child. They didn't understand everything completely or have a full picture of what was going on with the glorified visitors, but they showed up. That's what the father did in bringing his son to Jesus. He showed up, hoping against hope that something miraculous would happen, trusting that there was something going on up at the top of that mountain that would make the work at the bottom of the mountain even more powerful. And the crowd following Jesus showed up and they became witnesses, not to magic tricks and optical illusions, but to miracles beyond their wildest hopes and dreams...they witnessed the kingdom of God, alive and breathing and becoming among them even now. These transfigurations did not take the wave of a magic wand or a highly-trained team of architects and interior designers to achieve: they took faith and willingness to witness...and therefore, a willingness to be transformed themselves.

So today, I invite you to consider where you can show up. Consider what you must do to prepare yourself to be transformed. How can you invite the Holy One to be your vision, to show you the world through God's eyes, loving each part in individual detail? How can you be a witness to the glory of God right next to the vicissitudes of humanity? "Be Thou My Vision," we sang earlier, because we are called to witness not only the transfiguration of Jesus'

story and Jesus' mission, but also of the world. Let the kin-dom of God be our vision so that we can transform ourselves and go forth into the world, fully alive, living our sacred callings. So, dear ones, do not fall asleep while you have been asked to keep watch. Do not attempt to remain inside the mountaintop moments forever. We must follow Jesus' call to action. We must follow him down from the mountain, into the valley, through the city, and into the streets. And so, as Pastor Tim often reminds us, "if you hear that voice calling to you, for the world's sake, for your sake, for God's sake, don't harden your hearts."