

**SLD03.06.11 Transfiguration**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 17:1-9**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“One Minute Here...”**

You know, Transfiguration rolls around every year and I think, “Oh no, not again.” I mean, you, you’ve got it easy. Special Sundays of the year roll around and you get to settle back in the pew and think, “Okay, what is she gonna come up with this time?” But me, I’ve got to look weird right in the face and try to make meaning of it.

And, no doubt about it, the story of the Transfiguration is flat weird.

Right before it, Jesus performs a bunch of miracles, healing this person, feeding that person, outwitting the Pharisees, and so forth. Then he asks his disciples who they think he is, and Simon calls him out as the Messiah, Jesus changes Simon’s name to Peter, the rock, on which Jesus will build his church. Then Jesus starts letting his disciples know that he’s gotta go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. Peter says, “no way!”; Jesus says “way,” and changes Peter’s name again, this time to “Satan.’

Okay, then, Six days later says Matthew 17:1-13, , Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." And the disciples asked him, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" He replied, "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

I mean, what are we supposed to make of that?

Jesus starts glowing, two other prophetic poltergeists show up, God chimes in, and the disciples scratch their heads.

Well, I can tell you what I and others have made of the Transfiguration over the years. That it's about:

- The mystery of the Godhead made manifest in Jesus.
- The gospel of Jesus Christ trumping prior prophets.
- The frequent inaccessibility of truth.
- The ephemeral nature of revelation.
- The cluelessness of the early disciples.
- The human inclination, when we become befuddled, to get busy. Like, say, casserole-mania in face of a funeral.
- The fundamental foolishness of busyness.
- The inescapable requirement after any peak experience to come on down from the mountain top.
- The long dark valley to the cross stretching out from the bottom of the mountain that nobody feels like walking.

These are some of the directions to go with the Transfiguration story and you and I have stumbled down most of them. This go-round I'm feeling like maybe asking *you* to choose the angle you want to explore, and then letting *you* make a case for it.

There's a cartoon on my desk at home – I think you sent it to me, Bill – where a preacher is leaning over his pulpit to report, "I'm sorry, people. There's been a change. I can no longer help you find. But I promise I can help you seek."

Now, *that's* an honest pastor. So let me go over the list once again of possible takes on Matthew's Transfiguration, so you can choose the one you personally wish to develop. the story of Jesus" Transfiguration *could* be about:

- The mystery of the Godhead made manifest in Jesus.
- The gospel of Jesus Christ trumping prior prophets.
- The frequent inaccessibility of truth.
- The ephemeral nature of revelation.
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Which would you choose? Which expresses what Jesus" Transfiguration means to you? Oh, and feel free to add to the list.

It's as if this particular peculiar tale works better as a Bible study than as a sermon. As if most of what people preach about the Transfiguration is pretty much shooting from the hip. I guess that could be said about a lot of preaching, actually. Get past a review of the history of the prophets in the Jewish tradition and pointing out how, in the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus comes out on top, sooner or later you've just got to come to terms with mystery of a glow-in-the-dark Jesus. And we orderly Presbyterians are just not great fans of mystery, especially of the trailer park, county fair, roadside attraction variety. By definition, glowing Jesus-sightings are marginal to our theology, and there is no section, you'll note, in our Book of Order dedicated to the unraveling of mystery.

And what an unflattering depiction of Jesus' disciples in the story of the Transfiguration! Indeed, over the years the Transfiguration has offered me endless opportunities to make fun of Peter – the perennial gospel goof – for his energetic, enthusiastic, and categorical cluelessness. I used to enjoy the comic relief of Peter's tent-building mania, his walking on water debacle, his sleeping on the job, his refusal to let Jesus wash his feet, even his unconscionable three-fold denial of Jesus when it mattered most.

Only the years go by and I don't feel so smug anymore.

Speaking for myself, these days I'm so busy, I feel like a short order cook. These days, if Jesus showed up, he'd have to wait in line like everybody else. These days I just don't have time for glowing prophets and weighty, mysterious moments of transformation; I'm too busy building tents. How about you?

But as I think about where we are in the church year, in the rhythm of our faith, it occurs to me how recently we just celebrated the birth of the Christ child, how little time it took him to get circumcised, baptized and recognized. Then you and I spent five or six weeks exploring the Way of Jesus, doing our best to follow him hither and yon in our own lives. And already next Wednesday we're heading toward the cross? Already next Wednesday we get a preview of his death, and of our own, and start walking with him towards it? Darn, the gospels mess with chronology.

And frankly, I don't know if I'm really up for that whole terminal journey to Jerusalem. Are you? The season of Lent invariably starts too soon for me, forever at cross-purposes, the way it is, with the budding seductions of spring. Who wants to give up wine when the blush is on the Bradford pears? Who wants to pause and pray when there are kites flying in the parks? Who wants to hunker down and turn inward when every one on our skin cells, famished for Vitamin D and revelry, shouts, "Yeah! Sun!"

This is flat not a time of year when it's easy to be Christian, never mind Calvinist.

But...we'll manage, I suppose. We always do. Come next Wednesday we'll start muddling our way through the valley of the shadow toward the cross...leaning on each other to make it through. Because ...for one thing...many of us know that perseverance on that path is a lot closer to the quotidian of our own lives than mysterious mountaintop moments. But also because we begin this Lenten journey together with the full assurance that it doesn't end in the pits. It didn't for Jesus and it doesn't for us.

Still, it's a tough path, the way to the cross. One Jesus' disciples have always preferred avoiding.

But *something* happened on that mountain that made them go on and do it. Not something they understood, but something that changed the way they saw things.

At a recent Heart Reflections session, Molly's daughter-in-law, Bebe, remarked that we don't see things the way *they* are; we see things the way **we** are.

And the way *we* are, well, things don't always look so good. The way *we* are, we're more inclined to see the shadow than the light. But something happened on that mountain – with, to, around, for? – Jesus' disciples to where they saw Jesus differently, to where, when they looked on him, his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. To where they saw other prophets in Jesus' company but mostly they saw Jesus, and heard or perceived or somehow felt in their bones God's delight in him. "The is my Beloved One, with whom I am well pleased."

If we don't see things the way *they* are but the way **we** are, it makes me wonder who was really being transfigured up there, Jesus or the disciples? Maybe Jesus was just looking like Jesus always looks but something fell away from the eyes of the disciples such that they could finally see who he really is. Maybe something changed for the disciples more than for Jesus. Maybe something changed inside them to where the way they were became in harmony with what Jesus was presenting to them, and they could finally see him.

Whatever it was, whatever insight or preview or revelation they were given seemed to be enough to keep them moving on down the mountain, on out across the valley, on over to the foot of the cross. Whatever happened to those disciples up there was enough to keep them moving, keep them following Jesus.

It's only in the last fifty years or so that our Reformed tradition opened itself to celebrating the season of Lent. And I really don't think we've gotten a whole lot more clear about what went on top of that mountain. But we don't skip over it anymore. We don't deny it happened, even if we can't explain it. What's more, we've come to count on the gift of the Transfiguration before we begin our Lenten trek. Whether it were Jesus or his disciples who actually ended up being transfigured, the spiritual sustenance given to them both before a long, difficult journey was the miracle of seeing one another as they really were.

To help us during the coming journey to see God and one another as we really are, we in this church do what we can to provide one another with company and support along the way. Because we need each other's companionship, prayer, and presence during the journey, we'll gather each Wednesday evening during Lent to study scripture, pray, and serve others through the assembly of the CHOA bags.

In our personal Lenten journeys, we also need the companionship of the wisdom of the ages. And so today and throughout the upcoming season, we'll make available a variety of personal daily Lenten devotions. This year, our "GIPPY Award" creation consciousness leads Worship to recycle former devotionals rather than cutting trees to supply a bunch of new ones. At both entrances to the sanctuary, there are a slew of diverse devotionals available in baskets for you to peruse and choose and take home with you. (Our hope is that, at the end of Lent, you'll bring back your devotional so it can be used again.)

You know, starting on Ash Wednesday, we'll have our big ole ungainly wooden cross up here for us to nail prayers to. I hope you will also take time during Lent to

check out the prayer room off the Fellowship hall. There'll be a "prayer tree" in there on which you can hang your prayers wrapped in yarn, like cocoons.

You know, whenever Tom Tewell invites folks to participate in a thing, he always adds: "It's like an elevator – you get on where you want; you get off where you want." Well, that's how the season of Lent is. You get on the path to the cross where you want and you get off where you want. Just remember as you begin your Lenten journey that we see things not the way *they* are but the way *we* are.

Lord, transfigure our perception with the purest light that shines,  
And recast our life's intentions to the shape of Your designs,  
Till we seek no other glory than what lies past Calvary's hill  
And our living and our dying and our rising by Your will.<sup>1</sup>

May God transfigure *our* perception during our upcoming Lenten journey, unveil *our* eyes, open *our* hearts, that we, too, might glimpse, even for a just a moment, the glory of our salvation, not as *we* are, but as *Jesus* is. For how else will we ever make to, and through, the cross?

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Swiftly Passed the Clouds of Glory, Presbyterian Hymnal, p. 173. Text: © 1989 Oxford University Press, Inc. Used by permission. Music: © 1943, 1961, 1985 Church Pension Fund.