

Scripture Readings:
Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Needed

Whenever I read this scripture I hear one of my favourite songs. It's no longer new but I still love it. In fact I love it so much I would love to have it sung at my funeral. Take a moment to listen with me. I chose a different version than the original just to switch things up. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gaeYQOq07w>

I hear this song every time I read this scripture because I believe this is one of those scriptures that is awe filled. As human beings, as Christians and as ministers we are always trying to find meaning in things. At times however, I believe we do an injustice to scripture and to the life of Jesus when we overanalyze it or try to make human sense of it. Sometimes I think we are just meant to embrace the awe and wonder.

In fact I think that is a part of what this never ending conversation about being “Religious but not spiritual” is about. Many “spiritual” people believe we “religious” folks have traded in awe and wonder for dogmatics, structure, and organized religion. Now I don't believe that is true for many of us. In fact spiritual or religious I believe we need the transfiguration, we need to be awed, we need wonder and mystery. Karoline Lewis wrote “at the heart of the whole conversation around religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious, is the desire to experience transfiguration here and now, regardless of the terminology we choose to use. In the end, we want a sense of the transcendent, the numinous, the holy, something outside of ourselves that is the cause for awe and wonder. Whether spiritual or religious, either way, there is a need to know transfiguration in our lives.”¹

I believe the majority of humanity needs to know there is more, we need to be amazed, moved, transformed. Otherwise we find ourselves without hope. For me scriptural events like these are about **not** losing wonder. I don't want to spend a lot of time explaining the meaning of the the transfiguration to you, mainly because I have not yet found an explanation that is enough. Even as Mark tells the story he seems to struggle with how to tell it, as miraculous and awesome as it was. David Lose writes “if there's any scene – short of the crucifixion – that defies easy interpretation and serves to rock the world of those who witness it, it's this one. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him, and there he is changed – transfigured – dramatically before their eyes. Mark seems to struggle to find vocabulary to do justice to what happens. Jesus' clothes, he reports, became dazzling white, adding, “like no one on earth could make them.” It's as if Mark's saying, “No, you don't understand, it's whiter than white, more dazzling than

¹ Lewis, Karoline workingpreacher.org

dazzling, like nothing you've ever seen." And if this isn't enough, Jesus is then joined by two figures from the past, Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets and, in this sense, the heart and essence of Israel's history."²

And then like many of us would do Peter tries to capture the moment. He wants to know how to bottle up wonder and awe. I don't think he wants to keep Jesus and his friends in tents forever, rather he wants to encapsulate the experience, capture the feeling.

In fact his desire to build tents (or booths depending on your translation) is not all that odd. David Lose reminds us that "the Jewish tradition associated the "Day of the Lord" – that time when God would draw history to its climax and defeat Israel's enemies – with the Feast of Booths (see Zech. 16). And so Peter, taking the appearance of Moses and Elijah as the cue for this event, offers to build them booths. Peter, you see, has taken this momentous encounter with God's prophets and fitted it into a pre-existing narrative and religious framework that helps him make sense of this otherwise inexplicable and somewhat terrifying event.

Yet by doing so he comes perilously close to missing an encounter with God. For just after he stops speaking, almost interrupting him, in fact, a voice from heaven both announces and commands, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" Peter wants to fit what is happening into a plan. God invites him instead to experience the wonder and mystery of Jesus.

I wonder how often we do the same. We desperately want an encounter with God – some sense that we are not alone, that there is something More than what we can see and touch – and yet in those very moments that God draws near we find ourselves afraid, unsure, and feeling suddenly very out of control and so we try to domesticate our experience of the Holy by fitting it into a plan.

Why? I suspect that as much as we want an encounter with God, we simultaneously fear the presence of God because we fear being changed, being transformed."³

It seems to me that the story of the transfiguration matters. We need the transfiguration. Lewis suggests that if we take Jesus out of the story we will discover our own recognition of the "human need for transformation, change, conversion, makeover, alteration, metamorphosis. We need transfiguration as much as Jesus needed to be transfigured. Liturgically, biblically, christologically, the transfiguration is a turning point, a transition from one way of seeing Jesus to another. It's not just about securing the Jesus of the future or holding on to the Jesus of the past but points to the real human struggle with change, with transformation. Transformation is hard. Change is hard. Traversing from one place to another, from one way of being to another? It's easier to stay the same. Stay the course. Convince yourself that what you've always known is satisfactory and sufficient even when you have glimpsed what could be."⁴

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/transfiguration-b/>

³ IBID

⁴ Lewis, Karoline

So often life events happen that don't make sense. In our human nature we try to put a formula and a meaning too it rather than accept that we have a God, and a life of mystery, awe and wonder. I long for us to get more comfortable with Transfiguration moments, with the inexplicable, with holy awe and wonder. With both the wonderful moments and the hard, life altering moments. We get determined to know exactly what is coming next. We make our plans (and that is not bad. I am a planner and an organizer more than you know) but I have also learned to embrace that which I don't know and understand, and pray that I will allow it to transform me.

“This is why the transfiguration rocks. It just shows up. There is no right time. It just happens... No amount of planning can predict the right kind of change. No amount of preparation can prepare you for an altered reality or an altered perspective. No amount of strategizing can make you ready for a transfiguration to be truly a transfiguration.”⁵

Perhaps part of Peter's fear is that if they leave that moment he has no idea what he will do with it. If Jesus can be transformed in such a way what will happen to me. Peter knows he cannot leave this mountaintop experience unaltered. He knows that the moment he tries to just move on and pretend he never experienced it he will be caught back up in the transformation. It is much easier for us to create our boxes of rules and structure but that is not what God desires of us. We need the transfiguration. Jesus knows this. We need it because we need to get out of our tents, or maybe just stop pitching them so often.

Lewis continues “I am guessing that not much about human nature has changed in the two thousand years since Jesus' earthly ministry. Transfiguration means exposure. I mean, look at Jesus. You can't miss him. Vulnerability is less than comfortable but it seems absolutely essential for life and thus for a life of faith. At least Jesus seems to think so. When we exchange vulnerability for certainty all we do is live the lie that authenticity does not matter. That the truth of who we are can be absconded by our denominational structures, doctrinal commitments, and dogmatic insinences, that is, our tents that we secure, pounding stake by stake into the ground. Tents are not just about shelter. They repel the forces of nature. They keep out that which might harm. They keep as much in as they keep out. And Transfiguration will rip our tents into shreds.

Transfiguration means change. We think we welcome change, but when it actually happens, we adopt stances of resistance and rejection. Or convince ourselves that the change can wait. That it really isn't necessary. That the time is not right. That the problems that will ensue are not worth the result of living into who we really are.

Transfiguration means a new way of seeing the world. And replacing the lenses of our lives is a lot more complicated than picking out new fashionable frames. Because at the heart of the matter is that transfiguration not only signals change, but alters life's direction. It certainly did for Jesus. And when that happens, well, no tent in the world is going to

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give you the security you think you want or need. Because when we shore up the shelters that protect us from harm we also run the risk of keeping out that which is so very, very good.”⁶

So perhaps if we bring it away from the personal to the more communal we can look at the stage of life we are in as a community of faith as a Transfiguration moment. You in a sense, as a community of faith have agreed to give up your physical tent. And let's be honest that is exciting, and scary, awe filled and awful. In the next months let us look together at the stories of our faith, the ones where prophets, disciples, and followers of the holy took in the transforming awe moments of faith, let go and followed. David Lose wrote. I just have “some sense that church should not be the place we look for order and stability but rather the place we meet up to share our stories of wonder and worry and hope and disappointment and stand with each other as the God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus draws near once again to unsettle our plans and meet us in the mystery of God's love.”

And so this is my prayer for us in this season

*I hope we never lose our sense of wonder,
We get our fill to eat but always keep that hunger,
May we never take one single breath for granted,
I hope we still feel small when we stand beside the ocean,
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens,
Promise me that we'll give faith a fighting chance,
I hope we never fear those mountains in the distance,
Never settle for the path of least resistance
Livin' might mean takin' chances but they're worth takin',
Lovin' might be a mistake but it's worth makin',
Don't let some hell bent heart leave you bitter,
When you come close to sellin' out reconsider,
Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance,
And when we get the choice to sit it out or dance.
I hope we dance....I hope we dance.
In the Wonder and Awe of the Holy.
Amen.*

⁶ IBID