

Transfigured Moments
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
6 February 2005
Text: Matthew 17:1-9

What are you doing here? That is, why did you go to the trouble of getting up, getting ready, getting here on time? Some of you drove a half-hour or more to be here—we have members who live in Chagrin Falls, Aurora, Chesterland. You have choices about how to spend a Sunday morning; you could have slept late, spent the morning with coffee and the newspaper, worked out, worked, played.

God does not come to church every Sunday. That's what the late Carlyle Marney, the great 20th century preacher would say frequently—often adding, tongue in cheek, when you're God you don't *have* to come every single week. But we need to be there week after week, Dr. Marney would add, because some Sunday, God, the Eternal One is going to walk down your church's aisle and sit next to you. And if God comes to church that day you are going to be turned inside out. So even though God does not come to church every Sunday—you better come on anyway, because you don't want to miss God when the Almighty decides to drop in.

The gospel text this morning witnesses to such a visit. It is late in Jesus' earthly ministry. He has led the disciples in a ministry to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is coming. They've seen powerful successes: the blind receive their sight, the hungry fed, the lame dancing for joy. But they've also met with strong resistance from the powers-that-be. The religious leaders have challenged Jesus' vision and practice at every turn. Now Jesus seems intent on going to the capital city of Jerusalem, and the disciples sense they are heading for a show-down. On their way Jesus invites them -as he has done so many other times--to come with him into the mountains to pray. Listen for God's word in the reading from the gospel according to the Matthew, in the 17th chapter at the first verse [Matthew 17:1-9].

At my family's rustic cabin high in the Rocky Mountains, you can see more stars than anywhere else. The summer's night sky is illuminated by a celestial stairway to heaven, a hundred thousand points of light piercing the velvet darkness. It can literally take your breath away—(though I suppose the altitude of 11,000 feet may also contribute to that).

Mountains have long been associated with clarity of vision. From the heights you can see the broad view, the big picture. From on high, you can see things impossible when you're in the valley. Similarly, mountains are considered places of great spiritual vision; "thin places" where the human world and the divine intersect, and we may encounter God most readily. The gospel narrative of the disciples' experience on a mountain certainly describes it as nothing less than a heavenly vision, a powerful encounter with the Holy One who authorizes Jesus as the Beloved Son, worthy of obedience. In fact, these are the same words declared about Jesus as he arose from the waters of his baptism in the Jordan River by John. *This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased....*with an additional phrase in the form of an admonition: *Listen to him.*

The thing about mountains is that getting to the view takes some effort. You have to climb the mountain, often over rough trails and rocky paths. There are risks associated with mountain-climbing, and you have to decide if the reward at the top is compensation for the discomfort, exhaustion, danger of the climb. Paradoxically, for most if not all of us, seeking spiritual insight—climbing up Transfiguration Mountain—will mean stopping our constant activity. We think we always have to be doing something: reading a book, following the latest spiritual self-help guide, praying the right way, or something else we hope will stun us with dazzling insight. Notice by contrast that what Jesus asked of the disciples was less about "doing" and more about "being." They disengaged from the daily routine. He led them away from the noise of commerce and conversation to look with fresh eyes, to listen, to experience the majesty of God as they had never experienced it before. For us, I believe this means practicing "Sabbath"—yes, setting aside specific time apart from the busyness of our lives to stop, breathe deeply, become aware of God's presence and listen for God's word to us. A pattern of regular worship within the community of faith is essential for discerning God's presence and activity in the world. Now it's true, not every worship experience hold transfigured moments. But I truly believe that the Sabbath break—of putting the business of your regular life on hold for a couple of hours of dedicated time to God—will sharpen your spiritual eyes and open your spiritual ears so that you will be more ready to see and hear them when they happen.

Transfigured moments won't always occur in church either. One of our elders told me about one she had last week when she stopped in Heinen's to buy a loaf of bread for the 8:30 communion service. She had had a long day, and was in a hurry, picked up a fragrant loaf of hearty wholegrain, and headed for the "express" check out line. A young man in jeans and denim work shirt was directly ahead of her as she lay the bread on the counter.

“Wow, that must be some loaf of bread for \$3.99,” he commented, smiling. Judy smiled and replied, “Well, it’s for my church, for the Lord’s Supper celebration. I wanted to get something special. You’re invited too!” His own groceries already bagged, the young man turned back to the cashier and handed her a five-dollar bill. “Here, the bread’s on me.” Flashing Judy a big smile, he added, “My name’s Danny—say a prayer for me, will ya’?”

Not exactly Jesus, Moses and Elijah, but I’d say no less a bright moment of divine glory right there in Heinen’s....if we have eyes to see; ears to hear; hearts to believe. We need those epiphanies, those experiences when just for a moment we catch a glimpse of truth we hadn’t realized before, or that we’d been too busy to see. We need—just for a moment—to see our every day lives transfigured; to see the glory of the Lord revealed in ways we can understand, to the extent that we see the same old world with new eyes.

....because, you know, we don’t live on the mountain top. The stuff of real life is lived all along the mountain side, and even down into the valley, including the valley of the shadow of death. Evil is not a figment of our imaginations; human choices matter, and some times-- many times-- we choose hatred and indifference over love and caring; revenge over mercy; ambition over altruism; judgmentalism over justice. Our sins may be subtle but they are too real to hide. We can’t fix the sorrow or the violence of our world, nor can we bridge the enormous gulf dividing us one from another, and from God. We don’t live in the rarified atmosphere of spiritual certainty and divine approval.

But thank God for those transfigured moments when light may be deciphered from clouds of confusion and chaos. When we are refreshed and restored by a glimpse of God’s hand at work, and are ready to be led back down the mountain to serve. The disciples’ mountain-top experience helped galvanize them for Jesus’ crucifixion and all that would follow it. They came to interpret the mysterious vision as confirmation that Jesus’ suffering and glory, the divine light that shatters the night of evil and sin, are held together by God’s promise of resurrection. The valley of the shadow of death is not our final destination. We are bound instead for the Kingdom of God, a reality of light and peace that is already coming near in Jesus Christ.

What if today were the day that God visits Fairmount Church? That God strides right down that aisle and sits down next to you? In a moment, we will eat bread and drink the cup of the Lord’s Supper. Ordinary bread, grape juice; that have come to signify Christ’s death and life; the cross and the empty tomb; our past and our future.

Eat and drink; and in the days of Lent stretching before us, I invite you to come away to the mountains and pray. Look for the clouds; search for the holy mystery; listen to the voice; follow the light. If we do, I believe we will find ourselves transfigured; changed by the grace of God into light by which to illumine the deepest night, heal the greatest hurt, and bring peace to the most troubled soul.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

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