

Creative Transformation

Text: Mark 9:2-9

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It's Friday evening, the end of the week at Silver Lake Conference Center. I've been volunteering as a Dean here each of the last ten summers, leading a summer session for kids in "God's backyard" the outdoor ministry site we are blessed to have here in Connecticut. Each week ends in mostly the same way, just as this one – the kids are feeling sad and reticent to let go of what they've experienced here. Their parents will arrive by 10am tomorrow to take them back to their various homes and whatever awaits them for the remainder of the summer. As we gather around our closing circle they give expression to what this week has meant to them. They speak a bit of the place itself, and the fun they've had swimming in the lake, creating things in ceramics, challenging themselves to try something really difficult at the ropes course, hiking at night or singing around the campfire. But mostly they speak of the close friendships they've formed, the opportunities they've had to grow their faith, to catch a glimpse of God in their experience of community. The comments that really land most meaningfully, though, come from a young one who, finally on this last day, seemed to really come out of his shell. He quietly speaks to the group, "with all of you I feel like I can be who I really am. I feel like I'm really alive. I don't want to go back home because I'm afraid I will lose that feeling." That moment of sharing and of vulnerability led to an outpouring of similar feelings. The youth enthusiastically expressed, in their own words, how the week had been, for them, a mountaintop experience in their young lives.

There is something so incredible about having such a mountain top experience. One that lights us up from the inside, out. A time when we are lifted up to heights of great joy. Camp is just one example among many of having such a memorable experience. A time when we perhaps catch a glimpse of wholeness, of life itself. Most of us have had at least one – I wonder, can you remember such a mountaintop experience of your own?

Only a few weeks ago we celebrated the coming of Light into the world in the form of a tiny baby. I hope we have one more "Aha!" moment as we arrive today at the end of the Epiphany season. Today is known as Transfiguration Sunday. It is the transition Sunday from the season of Epiphany to the beginning of Lent which begins this week with Ash Wednesday.

Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus takes Peter, James and John and leads them up the mountain. There they witness a dazzling light and the ancestors, Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. What do we make of this mysterious story? Peter, with his typical practicality, suggests that they make three dwellings; one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

When we are on the mountaintop, it is easy to want to hold on to that experience, that feeling. And we're also often afraid because when the dazzling light fades and we step back into reality we face a challenge. Will we remember? Will we ever feel this way again?

Transfiguration is a very strong word. It's not a word used in a half-hearted way. The Greek work translates as metamorphosis, which means change from one thing to another. The example we most often think of for metamorphosis is the caterpillar which weaves itself into a cocoon and when it emerges is a butterfly instead of a caterpillar. A way we might use the word is to say a

person's face is transfigured by joy, as experienced on the mountain top... but also may be transfigured by grief or by suffering. There is something immediately and noticeably changed about a person's appearance. Whether it be a beaming glow of joy around their face or the tearful sobs of grief.

Reading of commentaries about this passage, I learned that the transfiguration is often linked with the crucifixion. Lamar Williamson suggests there are three crucial events which are tied together: adding to these two is the baptism of Jesus where God speaks to Jesus and confirms his Sonship. Second is the transfiguration in which the disciples see and hear a revelation of the divinity of Jesus. Third, Williamson said, is the crucifixion, "a sort of reverse transfiguration, in which the sight of Jesus dying in utter abandonment to the will of God wrings from the lips of a Roman army officer the confession, "Truly this man was the Son of God." (Lamar Williamson, 1983, p. 162)

The first of these, the baptism, "is full of radiant promise," just as every baptism is. The second, the transfiguration, combines glory and suffering. The third, the crucifixion, is a witness to steadfastness in the face of despair. (Lamar Williamson, 1983, p. 162)

Just as we have had mountaintop experiences, we've also likely experienced some measure of sorrow, suffering and grief. I wonder if you can recall a time when you've been transfigured by grief.

This last year has supplied plenty of opportunities ... the incredible and unprecedented shifts in our way of life: job loss, businesses and other organizations closing their doors, social and political unrest, the marked increase in domestic violence, increased isolation, depression and anxiety. Sickness, separation and incredible loss of life... as of this morning under 470,000 deaths in the US alone. When we experience suffering and grief, unlike when we experience great joy, we generally do not wish to linger there; we do not wish to hold on to the experience or the feeling – it is too painful.

So the transfiguration is at the heart of understanding Jesus as the Son of God because of the way it draws together glory and suffering. Williamson observes that the paradox exists – both divine power and weakness, lowliness and majesty - in the one person of Jesus Christ. (Lamar Williamson, 1983, p. 162)

These moments of transfiguration, both mountain top experiences (which we also recognize in the glory of Jesus) and the experiences of great sorrow (which we recognize in Jesus' suffering) can be understood as thin places – those mysterious spaces in which the world we know and the world we, as yet, only imagine is thinly veiled. Perhaps it is in these thin places when we are closest to the presence of the divine, of Jesus himself.

I cannot help but think that these thin places, when we experience them, transform us. We undergo a sort of metamorphosis of our own. We are changed and cannot go back to who we were or how we experienced life before the highest of highs or the lowest of lows. Perhaps our metamorphosis is in recognizing ourselves, in the words of a French philosopher (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin) not as human beings having a spiritual experience, but rather spiritual beings having a human experience. Change can be scary and often is. Yet, God is with us through those experiences of transformation. And, we have the power to choose how we respond to both the highs and the lows.

At Silver Lake, as the deans and counselors are trained to do, we process with the youth with whom we've shared this week-long mountaintop experience, that it is possible to bring their experience of Silver Lake home with them. In fact, we want them to! While we cannot live on the mountaintop, we can find Christ all around us if we keep our ears and eyes and heart open. We can listen to the Beloved, sensing the presence of the Holy One in both the ordinary and in the challenging world in which we live. When I first came to First Church, The Rev. Susan Izard gifted me with this (hold up "Wake Up & Be Awesome" plaque) which I have placed on the wall next to my bathroom mirror to make the choice daily to make this day, and every day, the best day of my life – despite the circumstances. It doesn't always end up being true, but I set that intention nevertheless.

So, today we are here in the transition between God's revelation in Christ and the road leading to Jerusalem. The good news is that we know God's presence walks with us as we follow Jesus along the dusty roads of life; as we sit, transformed, on a mountain; and even as we follow Jesus toward Jerusalem.

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