

Sermon: Asking For A Hard Thing

Year B, Transfiguration

[2 Kings 2:1-12](#); [Psalm 50:1-6](#); [2 Corinthians 4:3-6](#); [Mark 9:2-9](#)

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Next Sunday is Transfiguration Sunday, but we will celebrate it today. It marks the end of the season of Epiphany in the church. Shortly after he was born, the three wise men found Jesus and brought him gifts. As a church we celebrate that moment every year, because it was the first of many moments when we realized that God had come down to earth to save all people, not just those from a certain area or family background. God turned up here as a person, as a baby actually, lived as one of us. God knew what it was like to look ahead and see death in the same way we did. God knew what it was like to have friends and walk when it was hot. God knew what it was like to be physically threatened by powerful people and have to decide how best to make his point.

It's a pretty amazing thing, when you think about it. Our bodies are so limiting. And yet God said yes to that limitation and became one of us. No wonder we celebrate the amazing story of Epiphany for more than one day.

The celebration of Epiphany, of God appearing in human form for all of humanity, ends on Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent. It's the perfect bookend to the three wise men meeting the infant Jesus. In this story, Jesus is a full grown man, at the height of his powers. Three of his followers go with him onto a mountain. He becomes radiant, luminous. A voice surrounds them and affirms that he is God's son and that they should listen to him. Epiphany celebrates God becoming human, here on this earth, in the middle of daily life. Transfiguration celebrates humanity meeting God, here on this earth, in the middle of daily life.

It's a miracle of Jesus, and it's the only miracle that happens to Jesus. All the other ones happen to other people because of Jesus. It's an incredibly important moment in Jesus' life and we can tell that because it has all sorts of elements that point to other important moments both in Jesus' own life and in the history of the people of the covenant.

They're on a mountain top, like Moses was when he received the Ten Commandments. After speaking with God, Moses' face shone, just like Jesus' whole body does. Moses is actually there, as is Elijah. Moses died and was buried. But Elijah was brought bodily up to God. Elijah was supposed to return when the world was ending, and he's there, large as life. There was the voice from the clouds, like when Jesus was baptized. Mark starts his account of Jesus' life at Jesus' baptism, so it's like using bold and italics and a double underline when he brings up an image from Jesus' baptism.

Think about the two scripture readings today. In the Elijah/Elisha story, a guy knows he's going to finish up his time on earth. That's sort of different, although many of us have loved people who were at the end of their lives, who knew that their end was very near. There was the thing with the rolled up cloak parting the water, which was different, but you could kind of picture it. Then there was the swept up into heaven part. That was not something you see every day. But even now, centuries after the last time anyone actually travelled in a chariot, we can picture it. And more or less, we'd all picture it basically the same way. Sure, some of us would be more Cecil B. DeMille while others were more Steven Spielberg. But we'd recognize the story no matter whose movie we saw. Sure there were the big, flashing "important story ahead" markers:

the mountain top, the parting of the water, the whirlwind. At the end of it, Elisha is left alone. He tears his clothes because he's in mourning for his mentor Elijah. He knows what to do with the experience. Elisha goes on to be a great prophet in his own right, as Elijah taught him to do.

Now think about Peter who has gone with Jesus to this mountain. He has no idea what's going on. He's in the middle of it and he has no idea what to do with it. He asks about making dwellings, because that is part of the Festival of Booths, where they built little lean-tos to remember the forty years in the desert after fleeing Egypt. He has no idea what to do, so he tries to fit the current experience into something he does understand. He knows it's important, he knows he wants to hold onto it somehow. So he grabs for a ritual that might allow him to do that. The way the scene is described, we're sort of with Peter. There's no context, there's no framework, there's nothing to grab onto and no good way to picture it. None of us would have the same image of what was going on. The way it's described, I bet Peter, James and John all had completely different experiences, all of them terrifying.

Just before he is taken up in the chariot of fire, Elijah asks Elisha "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." Many of us who have been with people as they died have heard similar offers. Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit. Elijah replies that Elisha has asked for a hard thing.

Transfiguration Sunday marks the end of Epiphany before handing us off to Ash Wednesday and Lent. We, too, are about to turn to a hard thing. But think of Peter. He must have felt so confused, so tumbled about and turned around. Terrified and lost and confused. Overwhelmed. He goes down from the mountain top and the tension builds and builds. Jesus preaches and the crowds grow. But so too do the concerns of the authorities. Jesus is betrayed, first by Judas and then by Peter himself, when Peter denies that he knows Jesus. There is so much more tragedy and horror to come in Jesus' story. Peter doesn't know it as he stands on that mountain top. He must think that it couldn't get much harder. He had to be thinking that he hadn't really signed up for something this hard when he said he'd follow Jesus back in Galilee. Sure he thought it would be hard. But not this hard. He couldn't imagine how much harder it was going to get.

When you get right down to it, as confusing and hard to imagine as the Transfiguration story is, that's why it's so powerful. God can come into this world. When all the limitation of human expectations are stripped away, the infinite can break through. The invisible becomes visible. Everything that scatters the light, that smears the focus, is taken away. This world can be full of grace.

So let's say you're convinced. We'll sing again, pray one more time. We'll have a little coffee and maybe a treat. And you'll get in your car. And ISIS will be there. The flu. Or you'll get a miserable email from your boss. Your dad will call and tell you about shoveling off the porch roof you begged him not to step out on. Your kid will lie to you because she's still learning how to stretch her wings appropriately. Most of you won't be home before that tiny flicker of grace is smothered.

That's why Transfiguration is so important. We've asked for a hard thing in following Jesus. We fail each other and ourselves so often, so spectacularly that it's almost impossible to stay connected to any glimmers of grace we happen to run into. In this crazy incoherent story that even the eyewitnesses didn't know what to do with it, God responds to our request.

Peter didn't want to make lean-tos. Peter wanted to hold onto a crazy terrifying moment because it was so rich, so full. It was more than he could handle and he wanted to stay in it long enough that he could get used to it. So he asks Jesus about making the shelters. God answers him, urging Peter, urging all of us, to listen to Jesus, God's beloved son.

Whatever else Transfiguration says or stands for or means, Transfiguration promises that we can make crazy requests of God and God will do the translation. We can ask for a hard thing, to live in this world crawling with sin and despair, to live in this world and believe in the New Creation. God answers our request not with a remember when, not by saying "back in the good old days I let three guys catch a peek at what was coming. Pity they were so completely inarticulate." God grants our request. We can live in the New Creation. It started arriving back on that mountain top and it's still coming.

It is a hard thing we have asked for. But God has made the translation and given us what we need to live into it. When we begin to live willing to be confused and turned around, willing to listen to Jesus and to experience the failures of this world in light of what is emerging, we are transfigured, we are changed. We see the glow and hear the words singing in the air. Transfiguration stops being an event back then that happened up there and begins to be the thing that so completely confounded Peter. Transfiguration becomes something of the here and now. We live with Jesus in the heart of that New Creation. What an amazing response to asking for a hard thing.