

“From One Degree of Glory into the Next”

Luke 9.28-36; 2 Corinthians 3.12 – 4.2

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

March 2, 2019

This is Mount Tabor, located about 11 miles west and a smidge south of the Sea of Galilee. It is an isolated mountain, rising sharply from the surrounding plains, not part of any mountain range. The summit stands nearly 2000 feet about the plains below. Surrounding the base of the mountain are several large Arab villages, at least one of which was there two thousand years ago.

You can hike up the mountain. There is a trail that leads to the top. **Or you can ride a shuttle bus**, which winds through a long series of switchbacks to get to the top. **There are majestic views** from up here, along with **some ancient fortifications**, a **Greek Orthodox monastery**, and the impressive **Church of the Transfiguration**. For it was here, according to a Christian tradition dating back to the third century, that Jesus was transfigured in the presence of Peter, James, and John.

You know the story. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John – three of his disciples – up a mountain to pray. Matthew and Mark say it was a “high” mountain. **Mark says it was “apart,” “by itself”** – which is why people think it was *this* mountain, the *only* “high mountain” “by itself” near the Sea of Galilee.

When they reach the top, they do more than just pray. *Something happens to Jesus up there.* The appearance of his face changes. His clothes become dazzlingly white. His figure transforms – that’s why it’s called *trans-figur-ation*. Moses and Elijah appear, and talk with Jesus. If you enter the Church of the Transfiguration today, you behold **this magnificent mosaic** at the front of the sanctuary. That’s Jesus, of course, in the middle. Moses is floating in a cloud on the left, Elijah is floating in a cloud on the right; Peter and James and John are reacting in astonishment on either side. **Here’s a closer view.** Moses is holding the tablets containing the Ten Commandments; Elijah is holding a long scroll. Moses was the greatest *lawgiver* in the Bible, and Elijah the greatest *prophet* and *miracle worker*. Jesus is the living embodiment of the Law and the Prophets, the two primary parts of the Jewish scriptures. He is also the *fulfillment* of the Law and the Prophets, bringing to completion everything the scriptures had talked about. He is like Moses, yet greater than Moses; he is like Elijah, yet greater than Elijah.

The three men had no idea that *this* was what awaited them at the top of the mountain. They had thought there were just going up to have some quality time with Jesus, enjoy the view, and spend some time in prayer. They did not expect that they would behold Jesus bedecked in the most dazzling clothes they had ever seen, having a conversation with two of the greatest men who had ever lived.

Peter comes up with a brilliant idea. At least, he thinks it's brilliant. He wants to capture this moment and hold on to it for as long as he can. "Master, it is *good* for us to be here," he says. "Let us make three dwellings – one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." The irony is that the church that sits atop that mountaintop today basically does exactly that: there's the main sanctuary, glorifying Jesus; and there are two side chapels, one honoring Moses and the other honoring Elijah. Three "dwellings"!

A cloud comes and overshadows them. **Clouds do that, from time to time.** Mount Tabor is high enough that sometimes the top is enveloped by clouds!

With the cloud comes a voice – the voice of God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. There are only two times in the gospels when God speaks. One is when Jesus is baptized. The other is here. At the baptism, the voice speaks primarily to Jesus. Here, the voice speaks to the disciples, and indeed to all of us: "This is my Son, the Beloved, my Chosen One. *Listen to him!!!*"

Then it all fades. The cloud dissipates, Moses and Elijah vanish; Jesus's moment of sweet communion is over. Time for the disciples to get back to the here-and-now. Time to go back down the mountain, continue their learning, continue their ministry, continue pondering the meaning of what they have seen. They had a mystical experience up on the mountaintop. *They heard God* up there.

I have come to have a greater appreciation for this story over time. Earlier in my Christian journey I wasn't really sure what the *significance* of this story was. Why was it was a major Christian festival? Some Christian traditions make a *really* big deal of this. We Presbyterians haven't tended to do that, although the story does come around in our lectionary, every year, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. I think that I am only just now beginning to fully appreciate the significance of this story. If we look at the pivotal moments in Jesus' life – birth, baptism, death, resurrection, ascension – the Transfiguration *has* to stand in that same list. It is as momentous and important as any of those.

What I realized was that I have been in the habit of looking at this story from the *disciples'* point of view. What I failed to consider is what it was like from *Jesus's* point of view. Did he *know* that this was going to happen to him? When he said to Peter, James, and John, "Hey, let's go up that mountain and pray," did he have *any idea* what was going to happen up there? I'm inclined to think that he did not. I'm inclined to think that what happened up there was *just as much of a surprise to him as it was to the three disciples*. He didn't know his appearance was going to change. He didn't know those brown, dusty clothes and worn sandals caked with mud that he was wearing were going to be temporarily replaced with something whiter than snow. He didn't know that he was going to have an opportunity to have a conversation – a real *conversation* – with Moses and Elijah, who were surely two of his greatest heroes. He didn't know that he was once again going to hear the voice of God, reaffirming what had been said to him in the moment of his baptism. He didn't know that he was going to be *glorified*.

What I have realized – really for the first time – is that the Transfiguration gave *him* a greater sense of his purpose and his destiny. He already knew he was doing God's work. He already knew he had a special role to play. He already knew he stood in the tradition of both Moses and Elijah, both the Law and the Prophets. But *how might that understanding have changed*, when he had a chance to actually *talk* with the two of them? A chance to *ask them some questions*? A chance to *let them give*

him some guidance? What new insights did he come away with? Surely he gained *something* from that conversation; it wasn't just "Oh, hi, Moses and Elijah – how are you doing today?" What did he *learn*?

Moreover: when his appearance changed, when his clothing changed, when he caught a glimpse of himself not as *Jesus the man* but as *Jesus the divine*, how did that impact him? That *glory* that he *shined* with, for that brief moment on the mountain, is the same *glory* that he *shines with eternally*, in the heavenly realm, seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He got a chance to see his destiny. His *glorious* destiny. The destiny that would await him, *after* the events that were coming.

I'm inclined to think that moment would have given him hope. He knows he's headed for Jerusalem. He starts telling his disciples, "I'm going to be handed over. I'm going to be killed. And then I'm going to rise." Those weren't just *words* to him. As he looked ahead to the *suffering* that he would have to endure, he could also look ahead to the *glory* that would be his, on the other side.

I think I have underestimated the significance of this story. There's a reason why it's one of the *great feasts* in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. It's the moment in Jesus' ministry where *divinity* and *glory* appear, *radiant* in splendor, giving Jesus *and* the disciples *and* us a taste of what will be.

Now, what difference does that make – *really* – for us? I think there are two key pieces here. The first is those words, "Listen to him!" Those words were spoken by God about Jesus to folks like us. Those words are for all of us, now and forever. God tells us, in no uncertain terms, to *listen to Jesus*. I have noticed over my sixteen years in ministry that there is a tendency among Christians to say, "Well, I'll listen to *this* part of what Jesus says, but maybe not *that* part." Granted, people don't usually *say* that, *admit* that, out loud. But I've certainly heard that *implied*, time and time again. "Well, this part of scripture doesn't really apply to us." Even some things in the great teachings of Jesus, like the Sermon on the Mount, I've heard people say, "Eh, maybe not." Yet, here comes God, telling us quite clearly and plainly, "*Listen to him!*" The temptation is to listen to Jesus, *in part*. To listen to those parts of his teaching that come easily or comfortably to us, and to diminish or ignore or even flat-out repudiate those parts of his teaching that feel more difficult and less comfortable. That's called "selective listening," and I'm pretty sure it's not what God had in mind! So my question is, "Do we want to be Christians, or not?" If the answer is *yes*, then by all means, let's go all in. If the answer is *no* – well, maybe we should talk that over with Jesus about that before we make a final decision!

The second key piece is found in the words of the apostle Paul. "All of us," he says, "are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror." He's talking about what happens when we are *listening* to Jesus. Really listening. Taking it all in. Applying it to our life. When we really listen to Jesus' words, the way those disciples sat at his feet, *we are looking at the glory of the Lord*. We behold Jesus, in all his majestic splendor. And *we start glowing like he did*. "We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory into the next." Every time we add one more piece of Jesus' teaching into our lives, we shine a little more brightly. Just as Jesus transformed from a plain-clothed man to the glorious image of divinity, so too do we transform. *We start shining with more radiance*. With more of the divine glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. *We transfigure ... just like our Lord*.

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