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Transfiguration of the Lord

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Terrified”

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Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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Terrified

When the reporter Adam Hearlson recently visited the new Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., he discovered 430,000 square feet of exhibits. The museum gives visitors a sweeping overview of how the Bible was put together, what stories make up the primary narrative, and how it has contributed to United States history. There are three-thousand-year-old artifacts, interactive opportunities, videos, and reenactments. And, of course, knowing the role of food in the Bible and in the average human life, there is a museum café, called, appropriately, Manna.

Although Hearlson found the museum impressive, he left feeling unsettled. “The museum assumes,” he writes, “that you can engage the Bible safely, as information, without taking sides.” The museum presents the Bible as utterly inoffensive, offering visitors a sanitized and domesticated glimpse into this complex book of scripture.

Anyone who takes the Bible seriously knows, the Bible is not neutral. Hearlson writes, “The central claim of the church...is that [the Bible] matters to your life today. It is not simply part of the past, it is integrally connected to now...The Bible museum imagines that we can all be biblical tourists, but the Bible demands that we become locals. Locals have a complex relationship with the strange book. They are regularly aggravated by it even while they are utterly devoted to it. They know where to find the secret and secluded meadows... [and they] are aware of the book’s terrible moral failures.”¹

Imagine for a moment a place where you are a local. Maybe it’s the place you grew up or where you’ve lived for most of your adult life. Maybe it’s a college campus or a particular vacation spot you’ve returned to again and again. To be a local is to know the best and worst of a place, its hidden treasures, its daily aggravations, its shameful secrets.

For those of us who take the Bible seriously, who might consider ourselves biblical “locals,” the story of the transfiguration could be considered all three – a treasure, an aggravation, and a shameful secret. In the overarching gospel narrative, the transfiguration is a miraculous event that supposedly proves Jesus’s divinity – in this sense it is a treasure. But it is aggravating that this account can also feel like a heavy-handed attempt by the gospel writers to reveal the divine authority of Jesus.

And there is something about this story that can leave us with a secret sense of shame – do we really believe that such a thing ever happened? Jesus shining bright white, Elijah and Moses showing up for a chat, God’s voice booming from the clouds? I haven’t visited the Museum of the Bible, so I don’t know whether there is a transfiguration exhibit, but it would require a lot of special effects to depict this event in a way that doesn’t seem utterly ridiculous.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/museum-bible-utterly-inoffensive-bible-not>

Despite all the conflicted feelings we might have about this story, if we are to encounter the Bible as locals and not just tourists, then we have to admit the transfiguration demands something from us, and it is more than just the suspension of disbelief. Whether it happened or not, well, that's not the point. The transfiguration forces us to admit that our God will not be domesticated or sanitized or rendered inoffensive. Our God will not be molded to fit into some box in our lives that we have designated to hold all things related to faith. And our God will not permit us to rely on what we have known or understood from the past. Just when we think we have God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit or our life of faith figured out – well, that's often when something happens that completely transfigures whatever it was we thought we knew.

At thirty-five years old, Kate Bowler thought she had exactly the life she wanted – not to mention the one she had worked hard for. She'd married her high school sweetheart, earned her PhD and secured the teaching job of her dreams. She and her husband had a newborn baby boy and she was leaning into all the wonders and challenges of motherhood. Then, out of the blue – with no family history and few symptoms – she was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer. With that diagnosis, her life was transfigured in every way – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. She was staring mortality in the face and she was terrified.²

Terror is exactly the emotion ascribed to the disciples who witness a whole new Jesus on the top of a mountain – a Jesus made not of flesh and blood and bone, but pure light. A Jesus who talks with the ancient biblical figures Moses and Elijah. Whatever it was that happened on that mountain, what rings most true in this story is the disciples' response: they are **terrified**. And terror can be paralyzing, which is probably why the disciples' first instinct is to just stay put on that mountain. Because once you've witnessed something like that, you certainly can't go back the way you came or back to the way things were before. The only thing more terrifying than coming to terms with a new normal is taking the first step into the future that contains it.

The pastor Cam Murchison tells the story of two white college students standing quietly on a street corner in Memphis, Tennessee one cold, winter, Sunday morning in 1964. These students were anxious as they waited, nervously looking back and forth down the street. You see, the day before, they had been a part of an interracial group who gathered to talk about nonviolent activism with Civil Rights Leader and Methodist Minister James Lawson. The meeting was, for them, a transfiguration. What they heard from Lawson was not only **challenging** and **hopeful; it also demanded that they do something**. By the end of the meeting, plans had been made for how to go forward, *beginning the very next morning*, when groups of students, black and white together, would attend worship in all-white congregations all across the city. So the next morning, these two white students

² Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. (Random House, 2018).

met up on the corner of their campus, awaiting the arrival of their black colleague, the one with whom they would attend worship at an all-white church, unannounced and probably unwelcome. These two students knew this action was a part of their call to discipleship, their response to the call of Jesus they read about in scripture, but that doesn't mean they weren't terrified. Murchison writes, "For reasons unknown, the African American student never made it to the rendezvous point. To be sure, the cost of discipleship for that student was by all odds higher than for the two white students. But what is known is the almost shameful relief the two white students felt as it became clear that they could refocus their plans and attend worship elsewhere that day without risk."³

Wouldn't it be wonderful if a life of discipleship was without risk? Wouldn't it be a relief to just dip into the Bible every now and then like a tourist, to hold it at a distance, to pick and choose the parts that resonate with us and the parts that support our points of view on any given topic, to set aside the parts that make us angry or confused or, even, if we're honest, terrified?

For the last few weeks as we have heard stories from early in Jesus's ministry, we have reflected on Jesus's humanity. But the transfiguration is solidly in the divinity column. This mountaintop encounter is all about reminding the reader that Jesus is not just a wise sage who has a few good miracles up his sleeve. **Jesus is God**, and God can be neither tamed nor contained – not in a sermon or a sanctuary or a holy book, and certainly not by our attempts to turn discipleship into a formula.

If you've been watching the Winter Olympics you may have noticed that all the profiles of athletes have the same basic narrative: he worked hard, she trained constantly, his dedication was amazing, her work ethic unparalleled. It's so easy to think that following Jesus is like that, that if we try hard enough, we might actually achieve success. But while that may work for getting to the Olympics, it simply doesn't have anything to do with the gospel, mostly because there is no such thing as getting discipleship right there is no succeeding and there is no earthly reward. You only have to read a few stories in which the disciples get it hopelessly wrong to see that. It is terrifying for us to imagine that there is no one right way to be a good Christian, no succeeding at following Jesus. If following Jesus was hard like training for the Olympics is hard, that would make perfect sense to us. What we are less okay with is that following Jesus requires us to take **serious**, even **life-changing risks**.

The writer Annie Dillard once wrote, "Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ...The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to

³ From the sermon "Terror and Amazement," by the Rev. Kristy Farber, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, May 4, 2014.

church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews..."⁴

*What we are doing here is **terrifying** because it is **life-changing**.*

This transfiguration is one of the few biblical stories we hear each year. The only other stories that can claim this are Jesus's birth, crucifixion, and resurrection, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. And, each year, the lectionary places the transfiguration here, on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Today is the last Sunday before we begin the season called Lent, during which we prepare for our high holy days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. We might be tempted to approach the season of Lent like tourists, observing, even admiring, from a distance. We might give up or take on something we've been meaning to give up or take on anyway – or we might use Lent as an excuse to brush off that New Year's resolution that didn't quite stick and try again. But if, on this Sunday before Lent begins, we take today's story of the transfiguration seriously – not literally, but seriously – then it offers us a different Lenten opportunity, the opportunity to take seriously God's command to the disciples who witnessed this remarkable display: "This is my son, the Beloved. **Listen to him.**"

This may seem like a heavy-handed device by the gospel writer to get the reader to pay attention to what Jesus says. But listening requires more than just hearing, more than just paying attention. True listening requires a response. To listen to Jesus is to receive a call to action. And there is nothing simple about it, because what Jesus has to say is often completely counter to the messages we usually hear.

Blessed are you when people persecute you. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. Many who are first will be last and the last will be first. Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.

None of this could ever be adequately exhibited in a museum and it is not meant to stay on the page in black and white or even in one of those Bibles where the words of Jesus are in red. What Jesus says cannot be confined to any particular time or place, not in a historical moment or on a mountaintop. It is meant to be lived out in our daily choices and actions.

So as Lent approaches, may we embark on this journey, not as tourists looking at a domesticated, sanitized version of faith, but as *locals*, willing to duck into some dark alleys and try a few restaurants off the beaten path. There will be some moments of terror as God transfigures our understanding, but I am confident we will also discover that God's power and presence and love – the same power and

⁴ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

presence and love revealed in the transfiguration story – are in every place and every time and every person – May we have ears to hear and the courage to listen.

Amen.