

Sermon for Transfiguration Year C 2019
Mountaintops and Valleys

Before I get into my sermon,
I'd like to tell the gospel story of Jesus' transfiguration in my own words.
Hopefully, you'll understand why as the sermon unfolds.

*On the mountaintop, Jesus erupts in sudden light.
As his sleepy disciples cower in the grass,
two figures appear out of time and space.
In solemn tones, they speak of Jerusalem,
departure, and accomplishment.
The disciples babble in response —
"Let's make tents! Let's stay here always! This is good stuff!"
A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable.
As it envelops the disciples,
they fall to their faces, anticipating death.
But a Voice addresses them, firm yet gentle.
The Voice hums with delight,
and the disciples, a bit braver now, glance up.
They gaze at Jesus — the Shining One —
and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars:
"This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him."*

*In the valley, a young boy writhes in the dust.
He shrieks and drools,
and his eyes — wide-open, feral — sees nothing but darkness.
Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle.
Scribes jeer, and Jesus' remaining disciples
wring their hands in embarrassment.
"Frauds!" someone yells into the night.
"Where's your Master? Why has he left you?"
"We don't know," the disciples mutter,
gesturing vaguely at the mountain.
Their fear wars with their exhaustion
as they watch the boy claw at his own face.
A voice — strangled, singular — rends the night.
"This is my son!" a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd
to gather the convulsing boy into his arms.
Everyone stares as the father cradles the child against his chest.
"Please," he sobs to the heavens.
"Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him."*

It's Transfiguration Sunday—the apex or, excuse the pun,
the “mountaintop” of the liturgical season we call Epiphany.
After weeks of hints and intimations—
a star, a dove, an abundance of wine—
today we stand in full sunlight, basking in the glory of the Beloved.
Today we hear the very voice of God.
All three Synoptic Gospels—that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke—
tell the story of the Jesus' Transfiguration.
This re-telling certainly signifies its importance to the early church.
And, what is more, all three end their accounts
of the glory on the mountaintop
with accounts of a “demon-possessed” boy
whom the disciples cannot heal.
It's an odd pairing, to say the least,
and one that has always intrigued me.
As much as we love and trust the glorious mountaintops of the Christian story,
most of us and our families and loved ones live in the valley.

Over the centuries, this singular event in Jesus' life has accumulated many layers
of theological meaning.
Growing up, I was taught that the Transfiguration is important because it reveals
Christ's divine nature, confirms his Son-ship,
foreshadows his death,
secures his place in the stream of Israel's salvation history,
exalts him above the Law (represented by Moses)
and the Prophets (represented by Elijah),
and prefigures his resurrection.
All very important, weighty theological stuff.
But here's the thing:
I rarely heard the sick boy's story mentioned
in all of this theologizing.
If it was named at all,
it was only to underscore the spiritual point
that we should not hoard our “mountaintop experiences.”
If the bumbling Peter thought it would be cool
to pitch a tent on Mount Glory,
then the sick boy's narrative function was to correct him:
“No, Peter, that's actually *not* the divine plan.
You can't stay up there in spiritual ecstasy land;
the broken world down below needs you.” (Any of this sound a bit familiar?)

Now, I don't have any arguments with Transfiguration theology,
but, I confess, it just doesn't excite me these days.
Yes, the majesty of Jesus was revealed on that mountaintop.
Yes, it is essential for us to contemplate that amazing epiphany,
and consider what it reveals about his identity.
But here's what I'd really like to know—
How does glory on the mountaintop speak to agony in the valley?
What does it mean that the two experiences—
fullness and emptiness,
ecstasy and despair,
light and shadow—
share a landscape in this well-known and well-loved gospel story?
After all, aren't there two beloved sons in this story?

We have no idea how the crowd at the base of the mountain
experienced the transfiguration of Jesus—if they did at all.
Did Jesus' otherworldly glow reach the valley as a tiny pinprick of light?
Did the crowd glimpse the ominous cloud
that descended over Peter, James, and John?
Did they hear a rumble—like distant thunder—
when God spoke of his Chosen One?
We just don't know.

What we know is that Jesus invited three disciples to join him up on the mountain.
What we know is that the remaining nine spent the night in anxious futility,
trying to do their Master's work as the stakes rose higher and higher.
What we know is that the scene in the valley became tense and ugly
as a much-longed-for-healing didn't happen.
What we know is that a father and a son suffered,
even as the heavens broke open on the mountaintop.
What we know is that some people who really needed Jesus that night
experienced the ache of his absence—even as a few basked in his glory.

What if this story—like so many in the bible, our book of faith—
is simply telling us the truth about life here on earth?
Describing what we already know about how life works,
but we fear to say aloud
because we're so invested in shiny, happy endings?

Most of us tend to interpret the bible as if its stories apply only to us as individuals:
My mountaintop experience.

My valley.

My relationship with *my* God.

What I have come to think is that this is both misguided and dangerous.

The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley.

And my valley right next to your mountain.

The truth is that your pain does not cancel out my joy
nor my pain cancel out your joy.

The reality is that it is entirely possible for us to sit in church on Sunday morning
and bask in the sweet presence of God's Spirit,
while one pew over someone else cries their eyes out
because of the ache of God's absence feels unbearable.

The same is true if we widen the lens.

Do we not occupy so many mountains here in our community, our country,
while beloved sons and daughters in other parts of the world
dwell in valleys of hunger, warfare, violence and abuse?

Do we not at the same time experience valleys peculiar
to our "First World" 21st century life: isolation, anxiety, boredom, frenzy—
while many who have less by way of material
and technological comforts and advantages
enjoy the mountaintops of more nourishing cultural traditions and communities?

To say this is all unfair is completely beside the point.

It is the world we live in, as our gospel story so honestly portrays.

And, so, here's the great challenge to the Christian life, that is, the life of faith,
and it is the great challenge to the church:

can we speak glory to agony,
and agony to glory?

Can we hold the mountain and the valley
in faithful tension with each other—
denying neither,
embracing both?

Can we do this hard work out of love and compassion for each other,
so that *no one* among us—

not the joyous one nor the anguished one,
not the beloved one, nor the broken one—
is ever abandoned or forgotten?

Yes, Jesus came down from the mountain.
Yes, he healed the desperately sick boy.
But let's not forget the suffering that came first.
Let's not flatten the story to give our faith neat lines and soft edges.
The suffering was real. It deserves an honest witness.
The cry of that human father, "*This is my son, my only son.*
I beg you, Lord, to look at him."
is a plea to Jesus that is truly the most human cry of all.
It is the heartfelt and heart rending cry of the psalms.
And this father's cry can be summed up in the cry of another father in the gospels,
"*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*"
Luther once observed and I concur that this cry
is the most authentic and powerful description of the life of faith there is.
This father didn't find that testimony on a mountaintop;
it was forged in the valley of his son's pain.
This is what Lutheran pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer
called "the view from below"—
This is the view from the foot of the cross,
provided we do not hide our face or flee away from giving it an honest witness.
It is the perspective of those who are oppressed, rejected and suffering.
It is the view of the world through the lens of the Cross.
This is the view and the cry we cling to as we sit by the side
of our loved ones and all who suffer, praying and waiting.

This morning we come to the end of another liturgical season.
Having seen the light of Epiphany, we prepare now for the long shadows of Lent.
I don't know what voices will speak to us in the wilderness
of our Lenten journey.
Maybe you'll hear glory.
Maybe I'll hear agony.
God willing, maybe we'll hear each other.
But whatever we hear, let's not flinch or flee away, let's give it an honest witness.
Above all, let us not assume that one voice must drown out the other.
Both voices need to speak.
Both voices have much to teach us.
Both voices need to be heard.
Both voices are beloved of the Father.
So, let us listen. Let us listen.
And we do listen and respond with faith active in love,
then Jesus will shine.