

Sermon: *Wonderfully So!*

Text: Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18

Person: Eddie Bellis

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Larry Walters was not trying to become famous. He was a truck driver. The kind of man who knew the hum of an engine better than the sound of applause. The kind of man who could tell you where the good diners were between here and Arizona. He spent long days hauling freight that belonged to someone else, watching white lines blur into the horizon.

When he came home, Larry had a ritual. He would step into his backyard, unfold a lawn chair, sit down, and look up. He liked the sky. Not in a poetic, dramatic way. Just quietly. Faithfully. As if the sky were a place he almost remembered. What do I mean?

He had once dreamed of being a pilot. But dreams, like freight schedules, don't always run on time. There wasn't enough money. Not enough training. Not enough "right moment." So, Larry did what many of us do when a dream feels out of reach. He adjusted. He worked. He paid bills. He sat in his lawn chair. And he looked up.

Until one afternoon, he was finished sitting and took action.

Larry went to a military surplus store and bought weather balloons – forty-five of them. He filled them with helium. He tied them to his lawn chair. He packed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He bought a CB radio and slung a BB gun over his shoulder so he could pop a few balloons when he was ready to descend.

He expected to drift a bit into the air. He expected to lift just a bit, enough to get a better view of the neighborhood. Instead, when he cut the tether, he shot up.

He ascended much faster than he imagined and higher than he planned. He soared up to fifteen thousand feet, and he went straight into the approach corridor of Los Angeles International Airport.

When he finally made it down, miraculously unharmed, the reporters asked the obvious question, "Why?"

Larry shrugged, almost sheepishly. "Well," he said, "you cannot always sit there."

"And were you scared?" they asked.

He grinned and said, "Wonderfully so."

Today we laugh, and we should. But isn't laughter often recognition in disguise? Because if we're honest, most of us have spent some time in lawn chairs of our own. We're watching. We're waiting. We're wondering whether faith, or life, might lift us beyond routine.

And sometimes, what we don't realize is this: We are more afraid of leaving the chair than we are of falling from the sky.

Peter, James, and John weren't looking for altitude that day. Yet Jesus simply said, "Come with me." And they left with him. Up the mountain they went. No explanation. No spiritual itinerary. And then, suddenly, everything changed.

Jesus' face shone, and his clothes blazed. Moses and Elijah appeared as if the entire story of Israel had come to life and were standing there in conversation. And Peter, dear Peter, did what anxious, faithful people always do when heaven breaks through. They tried to stabilize it through action.

Listen to what they said. They said, "Lord, it's good for us to be here. Let's build something." In other words, let's preserve this by framing it and institutionalizing it. Make no mistake. Their actions were not foolish. Their actions were most human. When glory appears, we want to secure it and capture it in a box called a building, don't we?

Then the cloud descends. And the Voice speaks, "This is my beloved Son... listen to him."

And just like that... Silence.

No more radiance. No more Moses. No more Elijah. All are gone. All departed the glorious mountain top moment except for one. Just Jesus remained. Just him and a path leading down the mountain and away from the glorious moment.

Transfiguration Sunday stands at the edge of Lent for a reason. Tom Long reminds us that this moment on the mountain top is not a spectacle for spectacle's sake. Rather, Jesus' transfiguration is a revelation for our endurance. The disciples are given this glimpse of glory not so they can avoid suffering, but so they can recognize who walks with them into it.

The One who shines on the mountain is the One who will sweat blood in Gethsemane. The One declared "beloved" is the One who will be rejected. The light does not eliminate the valley. The glory tells the truth about it.

So perhaps this story's meaning is not merely about what happened to Jesus. This story is about what happens to people who have seen who Jesus truly is.

Friends, this is where it begins to lean toward us. Because we, too, know mountaintop moments. We gather in this sanctuary. We sing. We pray. And we come to this table. And here, something really happens.

In our Reformed theology, we say Christ is mysteriously present with us at the table in the elements. The bread is still bread, and the cup is still juice. We do not because we manufacture holiness. But Jesus still chooses to meet us here. His table is not symbolic nostalgia. His table is about Jesus's participation in our struggles, and he sets a place for each of our names on the nameplate. He wants us all to drink and eat with him.

Heaven and earth do not collide in fireworks. They meet in bread. They find nourishment in the cup. Taken together, they offer us His promise.

This is our mountain. But here in this quiet moment, we hear Matthew's Gospel, and the voice does not say, "Build here." God's power points to this moment, and if we lean close, we can hear God speak in the silence, saying, "Listen. This is my beloved son. In him, I am well pleased."

And the Jesus we listen to never stays on the mountain.

Which matters deeply for us. Because we are a PC(USA) congregation in Franklin, Tennessee. We are not the largest church on the corner. We are not the loudest voice in the county. We do not measure our vitality by visibility.

And in an interim season, it is tempting—so very tempting—to sit in our lawn chairs and stare at the sky of memory. Remembering when attendance was fuller. When budgets felt easier. When the future seemed predictable.

But Transfiguration Sunday does not ask us to preserve yesterday's light. Today's moment asks whether we will follow the One who is already walking downhill. And downhill, in this Gospel, is always toward those in desperate need.

Toward the father with the tormented child waiting at the bottom of the mountain. Toward the hungry living paycheck to paycheck. Toward the divided homes of those walking through their season of divorce. Toward the fear-filled people who are suffering.

Jesus is headed down and into a world very much like ours. Jesus is looking over his shoulder at us, beckoning for us to follow.

He calls us to bring healing and hope to a nation polarized. He calls us to witness to call in the storms of anxious communities. He calls us to seek and speak the truth to a media that speaks loudly on all sides and that feeds on our fears. Jesus calls us to invite others to follow him when the world's trust is thin.

The church's calling is not to outshine the culture. No, absolutely not! Our call is to descend into the valley of human need and bear witness to the Light we did not create.

Frederick Buechner once sat on a mountaintop in Vermont while the hills turned lavender in the evening light. A guest asked him, "Why would you ever leave this place?"

Years later, he wrote, "I leave it in hope of becoming a human being." That is the vocation of Transfiguration.

Not to abandon glory. Not to deny the beauty of our worship. But to let what we have seen here in the prayers, the songs, and the sacraments form who we are becoming out there.

So, Transfiguration invites us to come to this table. And this table, our Lord's Table, is thin space. Here, heaven brushes earth. Here Christ gives himself again. Here, broken people are named beloved.

But I want us to remember and notice something. The bread is broken. The cup is poured out. Even here, glory takes the shape of self-giving. Which means the mountain has already prepared us for the valley.

And in just a few minutes, we will stand. We will sing. We will walk out those doors. No spotlight. No cloud. We walk out of here as the body of Christ. We listen and follow just Jesus. We take the road ahead.

And if, somewhere in the quiet of your own heart, you feel that small tremor—that sense that following him might actually cost something—that sense that obedience might lift you higher than you planned—that sense that the church's future may require courage instead of comfort—If someone asks you then, "Are you afraid?"

Perhaps faith does not answer loudly. Perhaps it answers honestly. Perhaps the words flow off your lips like Larry Walters, "Yes. Wonderfully so." Amen.