

# Breathless Adventures

Luke 9:28-36

Reformation Sunday

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Great moments in life come only once in a while. But we all need them – making the team, receiving that college acceptance letter, graduation day, the day you become engaged, the birth of a child — such moments give deep meaning to life. Some moments need only happen once and they change everything. Columbus only had to sail across the Atlantic once to open up a whole new world. Charles Lindbergh only had to fly across the ocean once and everything changed. The first time astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon, planetary exploration was different.

Such moments do come in different ways, when the future is made present and reality floods in. Who could stand much more than a moment of such reality? And we don't need much more than a moment to change us. Think of just one life-changing moment in your own life!

Peter, James, and John described the indescribable, a transforming moment in their lives when Jesus was transfigured before them. Our text today tells the story of a joyful mountain-top experience for the disciples, where the sacred became mysteriously real and tangible. For a brief moment they saw things clearly. However, the bumbling disciples didn't know what to say or do. So Peter starts spouting off something about building some tabernacles until he is silenced by a voice from heaven, "This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

The word metamorphosis translated means "transfigured" in the Greek. It is a word familiar to us from our study of biology. We learned about insects and plants that change during embryonic development, from an immature form to an adult form. The story of the transfiguration reminds us that there is a changed form, a "metamorphosis" of our understanding of Jesus that is essential to faith and ministry.

Whenever the word is used in the Bible, it is always in the passive, even in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. It is not something we can do to or for ourselves. We can allow it to happen, or we can resist it, but the initiative comes from God, just as it does in the act of baptism. The disciples are forced to see their Lord in a new light revealed behind a cloud of unknowing.

This story reveals (something Paul would later write about) that Jesus is the ultimate revelation and representative of God. "He is the image of the invisible God!"<sup>1</sup> Jesus discloses God through a human face. "Listen to him," says the voice from heaven.

Once in their lives, three men saw the glory of God loose in and around Jesus. And in a flash they saw what that meant to the world. They suddenly knew that God is not in heaven and everything is not right with the world. They knew God is loose in the world where all hell has broken loose. And they trembled trying to get a hold of what that meant. The insight only lasted a moment. It was a glimpse of the future but the future had not yet come. They had to go back down the mountain to the valley where there were the sick to heal, and disputes among the followers to settle and lots of work to be done.

This weekend we have again witnessed the tragedy of hatred unleashed, this time in a Pittsburgh community known as Squirrel Hill. A Jewish community center, the Tree of Life Synagogue, was the scene of another mass shooting. All hell is still breaking loose here in the valley. Our hearts and prayers go out for those who have suffered loss and death at the hands of another deranged gunman.

Peter wanted to fix that moment on the mountaintop in concrete but he couldn't, and neither can we. Glimpses like that of a better future come and go. God once in a while pulls back the curtain, between today and eternity, for only a peek. And when you catch a glimpse, on a mountaintop or maybe in a pew on Sunday in worship, cherish it! But don't ever try to capture it or commemorate it. For it comes as a gift, a glimpse, a fleeting, blessed gift of revelation. Don't forget those moments but don't freeze them either.

Life in the valley just refuses to go away. Still, I can go back to work on Monday morning a little different . . . because for one shining moment I've seen something. The curtain between the present and the future gets pulled back and we know the future as if it were now. On the mountain, we are in danger of believing too much. In the valley, we are in danger of believing too little.

A hundred and fifty years ago, young Hattie May Wiatt, turned a city upside down. She lived

1 Colossians 1:15

near a church where she attended Sunday school. One day the Pastor Rev. Russell Conwell saw Hattie walking back home because there was not enough space for her in the classroom. When he approached her, she asked if he would take her offering to church for her. The pastor took her back to church and made sure they found her a seat in the classroom, which thrilled young Hattie. Within two years of her first visit, Hattie became very ill and died. Her parents called upon Rev. Conwell, who had befriended their daughter, to help with the funeral arrangements. As they were going through her things, they found a crumpled little purse. Inside, were 57 cents and a note scribbled in her handwriting which read: "This is to help build the little church bigger so more children can go to Sunday school."

For two years she had saved for this offering. Back then, 57 cents was much more than it is today but it still wasn't much. The pastor carried the note back to the church and the next Sunday challenged the church to raise enough money to build a larger building. 57 pennies were sold. A house nearby was purchased and the Sunday school program began to grow. Some of the members of the church formed the Wiatt Mite Society which was dedicated to making Hattie's 57 cents grow as much as possible and to buy even more property so the church could expand. A generous spirit of giving spread through the people attending the church.

A commitment to education led to the first classes conducted in that house bought with the money from Hattie's initial offering. The house, referred to Temple College, was later sold and became the first building of Temple University in the heart of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. Thirty five thousand students are trained there and on the campus there is a medical school and hospital that cares for those in need. Temple Baptist Church has a sanctuary now that seats 3,300 worshipers. All of this was set in motion because of the gift of a young girl who wanted to make sure all children had a place in the Sunday school.

Big things grow from small seeds. Faith and ministry may begin passively on the mountain but it does not remain there. It moves actively into the valley below where we live and makes a difference. "This is my son, my chosen, listen to him." I think I see what shook them up. Fear of the Lord is one way of saying that I suddenly see that I live in a moral universe which simply will not tolerate some things because of God. A society that puts its glory ahead of its goodness begins to unravel because of God. A church that simply affirms the values of the culture in which it lives is on the way to oblivion, because of God in this world. A life that loses confidence in

the highest ideals will destroy itself by the lowest level we come to expect, because of God in this world. It's not because God is mean or vindictive but because God is just too good to let people think they can do anything they want to do.

“This is my son . . . listen to him.” Will I listen to him when life closes in and I go into some dark moment of eclipse and everything shouts despair? Will I listen for the voice of the one who was, “. . . a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief”? Will I listen when I feel on top of everything — when life is going along great? When I've got things under control, will I listen to him then? That seems to be the question hanging in the air: “This is my son — you've caught a glimpse of his glory. Now, will you listen to him?”

Many here today can say that worship makes all the difference. It's not a retreat into some mystical world or an escape into fantasy. We withdraw upon this mountain in order to return to the valley. We return from worship to an unchanged world . . . but we ourselves are changed! We have seen the Lord, we have heard a voice, and now we know not to be afraid. Big things grow from small seeds, and great visions come from surprising places.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

