

Transfigured

Menno Mennonite Church

March 2, 2025

Purpose: To explore the work of transformation based from God's revelation.

Message: As we are brought into contact with the full vision of God's will, we too are moved into that which the Spirit wills.

Scripture: Luke 9: 28-36 (I will read); Exodus 34:29-35 (Please read)

Synopsis: The transfiguration is peculiar. It is this moment where the gospels record the confirmation of the case they have been making all the time: That this is the revelation of God on the order of the ones who give the law and the prophets, if not more so. We read this as the hand tip that lets us in on the divine plan as the ongoing reality unfolds itself. Seldom do we ask "What does this mean for us?"

When we encounter the divine, be it in the witness of the Gospels, and even more so within the witness of our own lives, we cannot but be moved. Our prayers, our good intentions often reach out for God's help, God's presence. Yet there are times when we do encounter God, we can be at a loss of what it then means for us moving forward. All that God is doing in our midst is meant to bring us more and more into God's way and God's will, if we are awake enough to see it and be changed.

Luke 9:28-36 CEB

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said these things,
he took Peter, John, and James,
and went up on a mountain to pray.

²⁹ As he was praying,
the appearance of his face changed
and his clothes flashed white like lightning.

³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah,
were talking with him.

³¹ They were clothed with heavenly splendor
and spoke about Jesus' departure,
which he would achieve in Jerusalem.

³² Peter and those with him
were almost overcome by sleep,
but they managed to stay awake
and saw his glory as well
as the two men with him.

³³ As the two men were about to leave Jesus,
Peter said to him,

“Master, it’s good that we’re here.
We should construct three shrines:
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—

but he didn’t know what he was saying.

³⁴ Peter was still speaking when a cloud overshadowed them.
As they entered the cloud,
they were overcome with awe.

³⁵ Then a voice from the cloud said,

“This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!”

³⁶ Even as the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone.
They were speechless
and at the time told no one what they had seen.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day of the church calendar where we come together to celebrate the glorious transformation of our Lord, celebrating the happy event with the first apostles as the glory of Jesus was revealed in full. No wait a minute. It says here that the disciples were confused by what they saw, likely for want of being terrified cowering before the awesome sight of a transformed Christ. This isn't quite it. Let's try this again....

Today is transfiguration Sunday, a day within the church calendar when we fearfully encounter the power of God unleashed, and leave charged to live a hopeful and fruitful life in the ongoing ministry of Christ, spreading the good word to all who care to hear... wait; that's not quite it either. James, John, and Peter keep it quiet, pondering what it could mean; perhaps looking to each other to make sure they actually saw what they thought they saw. Beyond that, Jesus is preparing for a life chapter that is anything but triumphant. It feels a bit too soon. Maybe another angle.

Today is the Sunday of the Transfiguration, where we recognize the continuity of the Godly succession of the prophetic work of God from Moses and Elijah to Jesus, recognizing with the disciples the big picture of the future that God has in store for them. This is the day where we come with the disciples to understand all that has been laid out before us. Again, this just doesn't work. There are elements of reality and the story in all of these, but here again, the disciples don't get it. They understand the whole messianic identity thing (it's kind of hard to ignore a voice from a cloud after all). In Luke they have just confessed it themselves. Still they are torn by the practicalities of the moment far more than theological import of what's going on. We have read the last chapter. We know that what is about to happen is both triumphant and terrible; nothing like the visions of power and glory that these folks seem to have in mind, arguing about who will be at the left and the right hand of a ruling Christ, wondering what Jesus means with all this suffering talk. Perhaps another approach...

In the transfiguration of Christ, we hear the story again of a powerful and wonderful display of the hand of God at work within the Scriptures and in our world. In doing this we stand with our brother and sister disciples, realizing that we really don't always know what to say, that we don't always recognize the hand of God. We are in awe of the movement of God in this story and seek to find a way to be faithful in our response as we are invited to continue with Jesus. We, like they, are sometimes more scared and confused than exultant and confident in our

response, especially where the Holy Spirit invites us to something new. It is not nearly as clear or as sexy, but I think it is rather close to the truth.

Transfiguration is one of those episodes of the Bible and the church year that you may not have encountered outside of a larger high church experience. It is one of those stories that we don't know quite what to do with, despite being woven into each of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). It is one of those amazing Jesus moments that is so broad in its impact and grandeur but leaves us probably more than a bit confused. It is this turning episode, right after the disciples famously declare Jesus' identity as the son of God, the Messiah. From here on in we are on the long downhill march toward Jerusalem. It is the shift in the story, especially in the case of Luke. To say that it is outside our experience is an understatement. We are left to wonder what precisely all this means, and where it takes us from here.

Perhaps that is precisely the point—not always knowing what to make of what Jesus is up to. Sometimes we are so drawn in to the extraordinary that we miss the reaction and interaction of the disciples and what THAT might have to speak to us. Because while I don't know what to make with Jesus chatting with the Jewish all-star team, I do certainly recognize myself in the disciples. I do think I might join them in their stammering response.

Perhaps that is the point. Here we have Peter, James and John invites for some one-on-one time with Jesus to go out on prayer retreat. I can all but see them waving to the others as they took off for the mountain “So long Andrew! Be good now; mind the camp while we are off with the MASTER...” But any image of privilege or spiritual superiority falls away when they are faced with the revelation of God is up to. When they see the REAL power of God, and the full depth and breadth of the Christ, they have not the first idea what to do with it all. They have special alone time with the Messiah and are presented with the holy trinity of their faith identity (less YHWH of course) and all they can do is stammer. Like a dog chasing a car, having caught the thing, they don't have the slightest idea what to do with it.

So, they fall back on what they do know; what makes sense to them from a human perspective. Lodging! We can build lodging! Some nice huts a fire, some warm pita bread and we can chat the night away. They see the wonderous and want to solidify it by way of grabbing on to the first effective action that they can come to. Shelter, permanence, and work they can do; witnessing holy figures and hearing the voice of YHWH they can't. It's kind of like the old TV trope of having the father go boil water as soon as the contractions start for a baby to be

born. Sure, warmth and sterilization is great and all, but better still is getting the guy out of the way to DO SOMETHING; ANYTHING when through the mystery of birth, there is nothing actually to be done but to bear down, breath deep and hold on. Doing something-anything grounds one in the illusion that there is something happening around us that we have the slightest control over. Building shelters grounds the disciples in the illusion of helpfulness when their whole purpose at that time and place was simply to be faithful witnesses to the very blessing of God.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have sat with the some of the deep questions of Christian faith—with that which Christ asks us to do. Who are we in the world? What are we meant to be? How are we meant to behave? I am guessing that it was not lost on some of you that we have not not spend a great deal of time describing how to effectively love our enemies, or to be salt and light in the world, or how to pray for those who persecute you while getting them to stop. The stuff of the sermon that really pushes us. We don't always know what to do with what Jesus says to us along the way. They were looking for the practical strategy to preserve this moment and keep Jesus where he belonged—on the mountain top surrounded by the holy or in the here and now with us. Jesus all the while is looking toward what is next and invites them to come and follow him to Jerusalem, to follow him down the mountain and into the valley where dwells that which they cannot imagine. Not because it is a strategy. But because it is faithful.

We long to be effective Christians. We long to have our actions make sense in the world. To make a measurable difference as we know them to be. We long to feed the hungry and not turn around simply to have even more hungry to feed. We long to preach the gospel and to end violence once and for all. We long to find the way of faith where we can effectively change the world. And that is good, admirable and welcome. But that, ultimately, is not what we are called toward; no in an ultimate sense. We want to take on effective change; Jesus invites us instead to faithful witness first, and from that a transfigured way of being second. At the end of the day, we are invited to all of this simply to be faithful to the Christ who calls us to love the Lord our God with hear mind and strength, and our neighbor as our selves, following where he leads. That is what changes us; that is what activates us; that is what moves us. Not idealism, not commands, not strategic presence, but only faithfulness to the one who we follow. Everything else is extra.

That's frustrating to us because it is hard to plan a calendar around faithfulness. It doesn't allow us to plan and build to bring the Kingdom of God on time and under budget. It

doesn't sound a whole lot like the world as we understand it. But doesn't it just sound like Jesus?

I think what this story has to tell us. We are being invited not necessarily to do God's work for God, finding the best strategy to cleanly spread the good news in the world, declare release for the captives and all the rest in the most linear way possible, but rather to simply find ways to faithfully tell of what we have seen and heard and bear witness to the God who loves the world so much he gave his only son to save it in word, thought and deed, allowing the Holy Spirit to work within the world as it will. As much as we want our marching orders in clear, specific and carefully delineated terms, rarely do they come to us that way. Rather, we are told to listen, to follow, and to pray for a new way, witnessing to God's kingdom on earth as it is heaven. And that is not easy. It's not always clear. It's not particularly easy to offer pre-packaged solutions, but it is faithful.

As we follow on down the mountain with Jesus, down toward Jerusalem, down toward that we do not know and cannot predict, may we be allowed the patience to follow faithfully after Christ, listening always for the voice of YHWH God that is building this world even still. May it be so, this season, and forever more; Amen.