

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Carole Johannsen, BCC
Christ Episcopal Church, Tarrytown, New York
August 6, 2017 ~ The Feast of the Transfiguration

Twice a year. Twice!! That's how many times we hear this story of the Transfiguration. Most of our lectionary readings come once every three years and special feast days, once a year. But to every preacher's despair, the Feast of the Transfiguration comes up *twice* every year: on the Last Sunday of Epiphany and today, August 6, on the official Feast of the Transfiguration. I've tried to uncover the rationale of that, but came up empty. It is what it is and so twice every year, we go up the mountain with Peter, James and John to witness the *metamorphos*—or “transfiguration” of Jesus.

One of the purposes of this story is to show that Jesus is the new Moses, only better. Not only is he accompanied by two of Israel's greatest prophets—Moses and Elijah, both of whom died mysteriously leaving open the possibility they could come again—but while Moses came down from the mountain with his face glowing, Jesus is glowing all over, face, robes and all. An unfortunate bit of Christian triumphalism there, a sort of nah-nah-na-nah-nah, but it was important for the evangelists to show those Jews still unconvinced that Jesus has not *abandoned* their tradition, but *confirmed* it. Peter and John and James would have picked up on that immediately.

Traditionally, the mountaintop is the place where the veil between heaven and earth is thin, where the glow from heaven can fall upon the dullness of earth. Perhaps that's why the story of the Transfiguration is recounted twice a year for us: to remind us, lest we forget, that Jesus is our link to heaven, that his brightness is our beacon.

That/s all very well, we get it, but what do we do with that in everyday terms? How does that impact us on this Sunday in 2017, and in the week to come and the weeks after that? The gospel is nothing to us if it's just theological God-talk.

Let me read to you the verses that immediately follow the story of the Transfiguration:
On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth, it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ... Jesus told him, “Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

We are not meant to live on mountaintops, just to take in the wider view such places offer us, then to descend and get to work.

The American short story and memoir writer, Tobias Wolff, wrote about the ordinariness of life, the choices we make and their often unexpected outcomes. In an interview, Wolff said, “What saves people has as much to do with the ordinary responsibilities of family, adulthood and work as it does these violent eruptions from heaven.”¹

¹ Quote from an interview with Tobias Wolff quoted by Peter Hawkins in an introduction to “The Rich Brother” included in *Listening for God, Volume 2,* ed. Paula Carlson & Peter S. Hawkins. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates both mountain and valley: it is a true story told by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remem whose book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, you may have read. She tells this story about a friend of hers, a woman named Elaine who is a domestic violence counselor. Elaine came to her profession from having been a victim of abuse herself—in her case severe emotional and verbal abuse by her husband.

In public, he was lovely and gracious, courteous to her and kind when other people could see them. But in private, he belittled her in every way he could until eventually, she came to believe the things he said. She came to believe herself to be somehow deserving of the insults he hurled at her about everything she did, everything she said, the way she dressed, the things she liked.

As Elaine tells it, all that ended abruptly one day, on a New York City street corner. She and her husband were waiting for a light to change so they could cross the street, and she happened to look up and see one of those magnificent art deco buildings that are scattered around the city. Taken by its beauty, she exclaimed to her husband, “Oh look. Isn’t that building beautiful!”

And he, thinking they were alone on the corner, took the opportunity to mock her again, demeaning her opinion and telling her the building was ugly and she was stupid for thinking otherwise.

But... they were not alone. A woman, standing near, obviously a New Yorker, overheard them and said, “WHAT? Are you crazy? It’s a *beautiful* building! Your wife is right. And you, Sir, are a horse’s ass.” And the light changed.

Elaine knew at that moment that she had hard choices to make, and a lot of work ahead, but she would leave this man and rebuild her life. And so she did.

For Elaine, that was a mountaintop experience, an eruption from heaven. For that New York woman, it was just another day in the valley, doing what she thought was right.

Twice a year you will be reminded that Jesus changed color on a mountaintop, but always remember that he then went down into the valley to do the work of his faith. We all hope for those mountaintop experiences, and when they come, we tell about them far and wide. But the deepest expression of our faith is here in the valley, with each other, on street corners and with those who need our voices, our hands, and our love. Transfiguration means being transformed from the inside out, and that comes by simply—and it really is not complicated—living our lives as the best Christians we can be. Not necessarily with a glowing face, but with an open heart and loving hands .AMEN

Readings: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36