

Transfiguration of Our Lord, C  
Exodus 34:29-35  
2 Corinthians 3:17-4:2  
Luke 9:28-43a

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This week's world news is simply overwhelming. With Russia invading Ukraine, we find ourselves in a situation that's shaped by forces beyond our control, making moves we are powerless to influence, but which will certainly influence all of us. We hoped the world had learned the lesson of how devastating and pointless war is, but clearly not. The old human sins of ego and aggression and brutality keep rearing up to kill and destroy. So we watch and wait and pray for those living in danger and fear. We keep our hearts as open as we can, and we do our best to hold onto hope.

Holding onto hope has become pretty much a full-time job these days, hasn't it? But throughout our pandemic experience we people of faith have been learning a few things about holding onto hope, and where to find true encouragement, and how to seek God's face in times of turmoil and confusion. We are learning.

I'm really glad today is Transfiguration Sunday, because today's scriptures show us God's light and presence in an unmistakable way. Transfiguration comes around every year, just when winter is thinking about giving way and the first hint of spring is starting to tease us. Just when some people are taking vacations to warm and sunny places—because we all need some shining light just about the end of February.

And along comes the strange and symbolic and beautiful story of Jesus's true identity revealed on a mountaintop. In the Bible, mountaintops are special places where heaven and earth come together, and that's what happens here. We may not fully understand the vision, but we get the gist. The dazzling light of God's glory bathes Jesus – a kind of radiant energy like fire or even lightning shines to show us Jesus is fully of God. Jesus has a part in God's splendor and power, God's beyond-ness. Jesus is one with God's amazing, all-surpassing love, God's perfect justice, God's perfect peace. Jesus stands in the company of biblical heroes Moses and Elijah, Jesus carries on God's never-ending, saving work for everyone. This is who Jesus really is. Jesus is God's Son, God's Chosen, our Savior. Jesus is *of God*, in fact, Jesus *is* God.

It's a stunning vision, and it's drawn larger-than-life so it will stick with us. Even a child will remember this scene. It's meant to lodge in our imaginations and become a reference point to hold onto, to keep reminding us that there is more to Jesus than we ordinarily realize. There is more to our Savior than we can comprehend day to day. And

no matter what humans do comprehend or understand, Jesus continues to shine like the sun. Jesus continues to radiate the energy and love of God. This is a beautiful reason for hope.

The disciples discovered the fullness of this beauty when they went down from that mountaintop. They walked straight into a painful and confusing situation. A boy was desperately ill with what we call epilepsy, they called demon-possession. Seizures *convulsed* and *mauled* him, even throwing him to the ground when he tried to walk toward Jesus. His father was anxious and heartbroken. The disciples couldn't heal this boy the way they had healed so many others. But that's when God's mountaintop glory connected with the world they knew. Jesus channeled divine power to release the boy and set him free.

I don't know if the disciples made the connection between the mountaintop and the town, between the shining glory and the human healing, but for us the message is clear: Because Jesus is *of God*, because Jesus *is God*, he's not afraid of evil spirits. Jesus is never afraid to engage evil with love and power. God's glory gives Jesus the power to set free those who are bound, to release the earth from suffering, to bring healing in the love and peace and justice of God. No matter what kind of evil confronts him, Jesus keeps on shining like the sun, all the way down the mountain, all the way to the cross and beyond, where death itself is overcome forever.

It's significant that in all three gospels that describe the transfiguration, every one follows it up with this exact same story of the boy nobody could heal, the demon no one could cast out – till Jesus put God's glory to work. These two stories go together, they are two different ways of seeing God's greatness, and we are meant to pay attention to both. When we are down in the valleys in the midst of pain and confusion, we are meant to lift our eyes and see Jesus shining on the mountain. And when we linger in awe of God's glory and splendor, we are meant to remember that God's glory chooses to come down the mountain, chooses to bring healing to where people need it most.

As ordinary Christians, we live most of our lives in the valleys, where things are confusing and pain is real. There are so many times when life gets complicated and we have to really search for answers and direction. We do not just naturally hear God's voice or see God's shining presence. As a friend once said, it's a rare occurrence when the Holy Spirit lands like a bird on our windowsill with a note in its mouth explaining God's will! In fact, there are plenty of days when we forget to even ask God's opinion. When problems get really big, we often neglect to call on God, we even doubt that God can help. We get to thinking it's all up to us, and we overlook our faith as a resource for meeting the challenges of each day.

I think the writer of Luke understood ordinary Christians very well – because Luke included a few special details in this scripture to give us hope and encourage us. I'll name just three.

The first detail is sleepy disciples. Luke is the only gospel to report that when Peter and James and John were up on that shining mountain top, they kept falling asleep. That's weird. If Jesus and Moses and Elijah were shining in front of me, I'd wake up fast! But they were drowsy and dull. Maybe they were in shock, afraid, not able to take in all that splendor, so they shut down somehow. But we do remember one other critical moment when disciples fell asleep on Jesus -- in the garden of Gethsemane, on the way to the cross, when Jesus was desperately battling temptation. Just when he needed them, Jesus' friends went to sleep.

We are meant to identify with Peter, James and John. We are Jesus' friends today – and a lot of times, we are sleepy disciples. We are dulled by fear and anxiety and doubt, we can even be tempted to imagine that this world is beyond saving, or God is not able to help. But Luke wants to say this: *It's not that God is far away, it is only that we are not fully awake to who Jesus is.* Luke warns us: *Don't sleep through your life of faith.* Lift your eyes to the mountaintop. Stay awake to the glory, and the suffering, that show us who Jesus is. Stay awake to Jesus, who is always shining God's light into every place of darkness.

Staying awake is the simplest form of spirituality. Being mindful means being as fully awake as possible, being as present as we can be to the present moment. Being as awake as we can to both the pain and beauty of the world, awake to the people around us, and in this way awake to God. And when we are awake, we can't help but notice how God is always shining, in small and big ways. We can notice and give thanks. That's encouraging. It's one way we hold onto hope.

Another way is prayer. And prayer is the second special detail I want to lift up from today's story.

Only Luke tells us the reason Jesus went up on the mountain that day was to pray, and he invited his disciples there to pray. Luke often emphasizes how Jesus made prayer a priority, all throughout his ministry. Jesus prayed alone or with his disciples. Jesus prayed in busy times and in lonely times. Jesus prayed to nurture his relationship with God. Jesus was setting an example for us.

Prayer is a resource that is drastically under-used by ordinary Christians like us. But prayer is a beautiful gift we can practice anytime and anywhere. Anyone can pray. We can name our needs and wants before God, without fear. We can open our hearts. And

there's a special kind of prayer, the simplest kind, where we can simply commune with God. We can make time to simply be in God's presence quietly, receptively. Carving out space apart from anxiety and worry. Time to sit peacefully God's presence, to just be and just listen. Prayer is a way to lift our eyes to the mountaintop. It's a way to hold onto hope.

The last thing to lift up from today's story is listening. The voice from heaven says: *Listen to Jesus*. And really it's not a difficult thing to do – but it is absolutely key to helping us hold onto hope.

We are listening to Jesus right now. In our worship service, we are all listening to Jesus, in all kinds of different ways. We are listening as we practice ancient forms of liturgy and pray as a church. We are listening to music and song which speak on many levels. We are listening to reflections and the conversation of people who gather in faith. We are listening to Jesus through the sacrament of Holy Communion. These are all ways of listening to the One who is always speaking to us, in love and truth and encouragement.

Trusting that Jesus is speaking to all of us, all the time, I encourage you to reflect on a word or phrase or image has caught your attention today or may catch your attention as the service goes on. Consider what word or phrase or image seems to be *for you*. Something that helps you see Jesus shining like the sun, or Jesus bringing glory into places of pain and need. I wonder how God is speaking to you, today, in a way you can listen to, and take home with you, and hold onto as a sign of hope.

We are sleepy disciples, that is true. And God is always beyond us -- but God is also *with us*. Jesus keeps on shining even when we cannot perceive it. Yet sometimes we do catch a glimpse, and we hold onto it. Thanks be to God.

Amen.