

# “Charged with Grandeur!”

## A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

Wildwood, MO

Transfiguration Sunday

March 3, 2019

Luke 9:28-36

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” wrote poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; it gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed.”<sup>1</sup>

It is that shining grandeur that oozes around us on Transfiguration Sunday, although this morning some of us would likely trade the shining grandeur of a beach for the endless Midwestern winter! Today’s texts reverberate with echoes of God’s glory. In Exodus Moses veils his face to behold the presence of God, and in Luke we hear the rather strange story of Jesus taking Peter, James and John on a little hike up a mountain.

It’s a strange story. Everything seems normal at first, but then Jesus’ complexion and clothes are transformed from their normal tones into a bleached-white dazzling spectacle. But things get weirder: suddenly Moses and Elijah appear – and seem to need no introduction. Luke says that three of them are chatting about “Jesus’ departure.” Peter, James and John are captivated, roused from sleep-deprived state. Then just when the disciples have thought they have seen it all, a thick cloud overshadows them, sending them into a terror-filled stupor. Add to all of that the voice of God, and you have a real whopper of a story.

No wonder Peter thinks he should start a building campaign! Why not? What else do you do when the world is charged with grandeur? As far as the disciples can see, this has become Jesus’ Mardi Gras moment!

This story has a marvelous way of drawing us into the action. Our imaginations run wild at the sensory images, filling in the details, trying to find ways to make sense of these mysteries. The best stories are like the favorite book we read as kids—they stick with us forever, changing us, molding us with their ever-transforming power.

Jesus’ moment of transfiguration is a thundering, ear-shattering sound and light show unlike anything else in scripture. It is truly a moment of shock and awe. But what starts as a moment of quiet prayer and reflection quickly escalates into a full-fledged Mardi Gras celebration, including Jesus’ physical transformation, visitors from other centuries and the thundering voice of God calling to the disciples.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44395/gods-grandeur>

This is my Son. My chosen. Listen to him.

I wonder if Peter looked at John as if to say, “Do you think this is going to be on the final?”

Quiet, Peter. Pay close attention, because the best stories are those which invite us to listen deeply.

There was a time that my father went a business trip to New Orleans during Mardi Gras. Right from the outset my mom smelled a rat. My mother was generally supportive of my father’s travel schedule, but she wasn’t a fool either, and there was something about this “meeting” that made her suspicious. “A meeting? During Mardi Gras? No one has a meeting in New Orleans in Mardi Gras,” she huffed.

When Dad returned, he brought with him a suitcase filled with beads, trinkets and coins tossed from the colorful floats. “How was your *meeting*?” my mother asked. His voice was hoarse, and he could hardly speak, but he regaled us with stories of his Mardi Gras meeting--at least the stories that were deemed appropriate for me to hear.

He held up the beads, telling us that the colors of the beads each have a meaning: purple for justice, green for faith, gold for power. He made it sound like a serious religious ritual. He talked about the coins and the krewes that organized the floats. And, of course, he was quick to assure my mom that the days were busy and filled with meetings. There was so much work that they couldn’t even get the golf course he told her. She was not convinced, looking at my dad as if to say, “You didn’t take your golf clubs.”

Stories transform us when they move us to listen. Not just hearing—hearing is just the body’s sensory reception of sound. To hear is simply to receive the sound waves. Sounds break upon us, falling into our brain, forcing us to instinctively pay attention. “Listen,” says God. “listen to my Son. My chosen; listen to him.

Jesus’ Transfiguration invite us to this sacred work of listening.

In his book *The Listening Life*,<sup>2</sup> Adam McHugh notes that “listening is a practice of focused attention. Hearing is an act of the senses, but listening is an act of the will.” We know that to be true. Your kids hear what you are saying to them, even if they are not listening. Your spouse has heard what you asked of him; whether or not he has listened is another matter.

McHugh continues, “In listening you center not only your hearts but also your mind, heart and posture on someone or something other than yourself...Listening, done well, gives power away.”

This sacred act of listening is an act of service. Listening to Jesus will take the disciples back down the mountain and into the everyday realities of sickness and struggle. Listening to Jesus will take them in new directions. No longer will they see Jesus as only a political Messiah, but as the Son of Man who comes to suffer, to heal, and to serve. To listen well is to open ourselves to the work of God.

When we listen, we hear Jesus speaking to us from the cries of those whom the world has abandoned. We hear Jesus speaking through the stories of those who do not feel welcomed by the world,

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction*, by Adam S. McHugh. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015.)

or even by the church. We hear the voice of Jesus directing us to do the hard work of living, learning, and loving. To listen for the voice of Jesus is to listen for the voice of a servant.

Peter, James and John do not understand this yet. Even though they have watched this spectacle, they do not yet fully understand what it will mean for Jesus to suffer. They have heard, but they have not listened. Joyce Rupp suggests that this is the reason for committing ourselves to the sacred work of everyday listening.<sup>3</sup> When we cultivate the art of listening well, says Rupp, we adjust our antennae so that we can more faithfully listen to what God is saying to us. “Our spiritual development depends on our being alive and vigilant enough to hear the message of transformation that weaves through our daily existence,” she writes.

On Wednesday, we will leave the grandeur of Epiphany behind as we journey into Lent. The invitation this Lent is to listen, and to listen deeply. The dormancy of Lent should not be seen as a time of inaction. Rather, like the bulbs which are about to burst through the earth, Lent is a time of hidden stirring. It is a time when we ask, “What are we listening to? To whom are we listening?”

Are we listening to what Jesus may be saying to us. We might be surprised at what we hear.

Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Open Door*, by Joyce Rupp. (Ave Maria Press: 2008).