

## Unveiling Our Faces

Transfiguration Sunday, February 27, 2022

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-43

By Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The story of the transfiguration takes up to the mountains where God's glory is revealed, but also invites us to enter places of desperation and fear where suffering awaits.

### Context for Luke, chapter 9:

*Luke 9 begins with the commissioning of the twelve and ends with Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem. Throughout the chapter, there are glimpses of the demands of discipleship, and of the disciple's inconsistent ability to faithfully attend to those demands. Jesus' face may be set to Jerusalem, but who knows where the disciples are headed.*

Someone has said that the summit of Utah's Hidden Peak makes you feel as though you are standing at the top of the world.<sup>1</sup> Having stood at that 11,000-foot peak I can say that there is some truth to that feeling.

There are several ways of reaching that summit: you can hike 2.5 miles, trekking up nearly 3,000 feet on a trail rather euphemistically called the "Peruvian Gulch Trail." And while I'd like to enthrall you with stories of Carol and I reaching that summit after a full day of strenuously hiking and mountain climbing, the truth is we shared a tram ride with several other somewhat out of shape middle-aged Presbyterian ministers attending a conference at Snowbird Ski resort some years. We looked less like Sir Edmund Hillary ascending Everest and more like a bunch of tourists who had eaten too much from the brunch buffet.

But it did, indeed, feel as though you were standing at the top of the world. There were 360-degree views of Little Boxwood Canyon, the ski resort, and the stunning scenery of summer in the Wasatch mountains.

In the mountains, the air is cool and crisp. The clouds appear to be within arm's reach, and the vistas are endless. In the mountains, we come close to those holy spaces the Ancient Celts called "thin spaces," rare places where the barriers between heaven and earth are reduced,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/utah/snowbird-hidden-peak-ut/>

and God's transforming glory sweeps us into another realm. Ancient Celts had a saying that among the rocky peaks and wind-swept isles of Scotland and Ireland, heaven and earth might only be three feet apart, but in a thin place the distance is even shorter.

Thin places, Eric Weiner has said, are not just places of relaxation but rather places of transformation.<sup>2</sup> And, in keeping with the spirit of today's reading we might add *transfiguration*. Thin places are those spaces where God sneaks up on us, overshadows us with glimpses of glory, filling us with what Paul calls "great boldness," lifting the veil of our humanness so we would be transformed from one degree of glory to another."

Time and time again, mountains are the places where God is revealed: God is named and revealed to Moses on the mountains, and it is on Sinai that God gives the commandments; it is on Mt. Horeb that God speaks to Elijah. Jesus speaks and teaches from the mountain in Matthew, and now here in the thin place of the mount of Transfiguration his is changed – the word "transfigured" could mean either *transfigured* or *changed in one's outward appearance*, as in metamorphosis. Jesus is changed, his identity once more affirmed by God.

Up on the mountain, Peter, James, and John see something they'll never forget. It seems God has pulled out all the stops—dazzling brilliance, sudden appearances, terrifying clouds. They are overshadowed by the glory of God.

Paul, who had his own experience of conversion, discovered that the moment of transfiguring change becomes an invitation to bold acts of faith. He references Moses, and reminds us that the glory of Christ is a source of hope for those who believe that allows us to remove the veil of spiritual blindness so that we might abound in hope. Now, for the record, Paul is not making disparaging remarks about Jewish persons. Nor is he suggesting policies about wearing facemasks!

Instead, Paul reminds believers that we are grounded in the hope grounded of the glory of Christ, the hope of transfigured glory which discloses Jesus' identity there on the mountain and which awakens the sleeping disciples. There on the mountain, Peter, James and John are ushered into a thin place where the fullness of God is displayed, and where even Moses and Elijah show up as Jesus' body radiates with power. On the mountain, the glimpse of glory fades as God's voice is heard, "This is my Son, the chosen one, listen to him."

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Weiner, "Where Heaven and Earth Come Close," The New York Times, March 9, 2012.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>

We do not have words to capture this moment. Even the disciples cannot speak about what they have seen, but if you have ever held a sleeping child close to your face, or if you have felt the hand of the one you love more than anything else in the world clasp yours, or if you have ever felt your heart skip a beat in church, then you too have sensed the power of a thin place to change your life.

Thankfully, we get more than just the brief glance of Jesus' glory. For while the experience of glory is fleeting for both and the disciples, it is paired with the reminder that God is present in the shrouded cloud of mystery. The experiences are often so overwhelming that we wish we could stay there forever. Peter, the hero of every Presbyterian, decides that the only way to respond to such glory is by starting a building campaign. But even the most ornate cathedral cannot hold this glory.

[Claudio Carvalhaes<sup>3</sup>](#) helpfully notes the communal and social dimensions of their appearance. Wrapped in glory, the three strengthen each other, Carvalhaes writes, giving meaning to the past and future events. He observes that one of the great lessons of this text is that “the glory of God is only possible if lived together, in community. Nobody, even Jesus, could shine alone.”

Yet do we not only have the glory, we have the presence of God which speaks to us out of the cloud. Listen to him, God says. Listen to that voice as he leads you down the mountain.

Just as soon as they descend from the mountain, they encounter a distraught father whose son is seized by a spirit. The father tells Jesus he has pleaded with the disciples to cast out the demon. Their inability to heal the boy tests Jesus' patience, and is a reminder that suffering is never far from our most sacred encounters.

This is the reminder we carry with us: much as we want to contain the moments of divine metamorphosis, or as often as we want to be wrapped in layers of spiritual ecstasy, the call of God is to keep listening to Jesus. The mountaintop light show is a reminder that glory is shared experience that leads the community back into the pains and struggles of everyday life.

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<sup>3</sup> Claudio Carvalhaes, “Commentary on Luke 9:28-36 (37-43).

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-928-36-37-43-3>

The disciples love the light show but are afraid of the voice. Indeed, many of us understand that feeling of being caught between fleeting moments of dazzling glory and seemingly unending hours of unrelenting trauma and pain.

But the promise of Jesus is that God is in both places.

This year, the story of the Transfiguration comes to us amidst swirling clouds of doubt, fear, and worry. On Wednesday, we will start our Lenten journey in a world wracked by pain and war. We are done – and I mean done with a capital d – with Covid, even though continued vigilance is important. We are done with crippling disease and isolating grief. We are done with the politics of division, and we are done with despots masquerading as world leaders. These are the clouds from which God’s voice speaks to us this Sunday. And while it might be tempting to stay up on the mountain, and bask in that mysterious spiritual glow, the spectacle we have witness leads us down that mountain and into real life.

Jesus leads us forward: into a world filled with parents who cry out on behalf of their children. Jesus leads us forward, straight into the discomfoting needs around us. Jesus leads us forward, even as we confront our own doubts and nagging senses of low self-esteem. Jesus leads us forward, so that we would find our identity that transfigures us into a people of grace, love, acceptance, and mercy.

I drove away from a meeting with a grieving family the other day and noticed a sign hanging above the door of an old church. The church’s exterior was faded with paint peeling near the old windows. The sign’s metal letters, loosely spaced on an old board, showed signs of age. But the sign still glowed with the hope we found on the mountains today. Its old letters pieced together a message of faith: “Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Amen.