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February 23, 2020 Transfiguration Sunday, Cycle A

## **A PEAK AT THE FINISH**

Exodus 34:29-35 Matthew 17:1-9

Have you ever played “Spotlight Tag” at night? You hide in the dark and the person searching for you prowls the grounds with a flashlight trying to spot you and catch you. The thrill of the game is avoiding your searcher. As he/she approaches your hiding place you freeze, hold your breath, while and your heart thumps in your chest!

That’s quite different from the heart-pounding fear of a child who didn’t get home before dark, and now can’t find her way back. Or the fear of a child lost in the woods and now search parties are out combing the area trying to find him. Or a motorist stranded on an unfamiliar highway with car trouble. Or a family whose boat capsized, and they now tread water, desperately searching for lights of any passing boats, any spotlight, anyone! Or you, worried about a situation, pace the floor at night, unable to sleep, staring out the windows, seeking answers. Alone, dark, confused, frightened. We know the feelings.

And then a light appears! Your parents are out looking for you with flashlights, a lighthouse beam flashes, car headlights approach. A light comes on in the house next door. You can’t see much, but you see a light, you see enough, you can make it now! *“A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* 2 Corinthians 4:6 says that God chose to shine his light, to reveal his glory, in the face of Jesus Christ. Not in cosmic fireworks in the sky, not in miraculous displays and events that would overwhelm us, but in the ordinary daily contacts with his son, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ God’s power and light come into our lives.

We all have shining examples of God at work in our lives through people in our lives. People who have comforted us in our sorrow, or our confusion or anxiety. Someone who stayed with us to help see us through upsetting and difficult times, someone whose face gave us a glimpse of God’s love and faithfulness. Whose face do you recall? Your mother, father, teacher, friend, doctor, nurse, spouse, child, brother, sister, grandparent, coach? It could be anyone. Because a particular someone came to us we have hope; we can face life again and move on.

Peter, James and John had such an experience with Jesus in his transfiguration. Jesus took these three disciples up the mountain with him, the same three disciples he would later take with him into the garden of Gethsemane to be with him in his agony. They saw Jesus, his face dazzling, shining like the sun, his clothes glowing white as light. They saw and heard him speaking with Moses and Elijah. They experience the glory of God.

To “transfigure” means to recognize in an object or person or an event a reality of another order, of a different realm. The appearance of something familiar is so changed that a reality and a meaning you had not suspected is revealed. Maybe you have had an experience that dramatically and forever changed your life and even before you fully understood what it would bring, you sensed a new dimension to your life, a new meaning or direction, a new importance, a new possibility.

As they come down the mountain, aware that the disciples don’t yet have the full story, Jesus demands that they tell no one what they saw; tell no one that he is the Christ. Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” God’s plan for Jesus is more than they expect and much more must happen before it makes sense, before people can realize the real glory of who Jesus is and what he is sent by God to accomplish. Before Jesus is glorified, he must go to Jerusalem, contend with the religious leaders, be killed and rise again

after three days. They glimpsed God's glory in Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration; they will understand it only after his death and resurrection.

WHAT ARE YOUR BOOK READING HABITS? Do you read a book all the way through start to finish, or do you read the last chapter first to see how it ends? Readers argue which is the better habit. Some psychologists from UC San Diego did a study and they found that those who read the end of a story first actually enjoyed the story more than those who read the story from beginning to end. The lead psychologist, Jonathan Leavitt, said once people know the ending to the story, it becomes easier to process the information and gain a deeper understanding of the action in the story. (1)

SPOILER ALERTS: On the other hand, knowing the ending to a story can be frustrating to some people. That's the purpose of spoiler alerts. A movie fan in Hong Kong was beaten up last year when he came out of a theater and began loudly announcing to fans waiting in line for the next showing the ending to the movie *Avengers: Endgame* which had just come out. Not everyone likes a peek at the ending first. It spoils the experience for them. (2)

Peter, James and John got a peek at the end of the story. In this man, in this moment, on this mountain, for just a moment, God's divine plan for humanity is revealed!

- Jesus isn't simply a man who has been touched by the glory of God. He is God in human flesh.
- Jesus isn't just a man sent from God; He is God come to earth to redeem His people.
- Jesus' glory will be revealed in his suffering for our sake to show us God's love and salvation.

Every year on this last Sunday of Epiphany, before Lent begins next Sunday, we climb the mountain of Transfiguration to get a peek at God's glory in Jesus, - to get a glimpse of the kingdom of God - to see where we are headed. Atop the mountain, we get a peek ahead to Easter; we see storm clouds brewing at Mt Calvary. We know what's coming, we know what lies ahead for Jesus – we know the cross is already looming over him, we know that his death is only weeks away. We also discover again that the God who sustained Jesus, is the God who sustains us. Jesus saw Moses, the great lawgiver whose face glowed when he talked with God, and Jesus saw Elijah, the great prophet of God who was both afraid and yet willing to challenge the kings of the earth. Jesus drew from their example the strength and the courage for the road ahead of him.

These next few Sundays will remind us that Jesus experienced the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus walked the path of suffering for us, he prayed for us, he fought the spiritual fight for us. He died for us. Our destiny is joined to Christ's destiny, the way of the cross is the way to life and peace.

GLIMPSE: In Jesus we get a glimpse of heaven; a glimpse of humanity as God intends us to be, a glimpse of the power that surrounds us; a glimpse of the communion of saints who surround us. Just beyond the veil the glory of God calls to us, reminding us that in the final days we too will be bright shining as the sun.

Lent takes us through the agony of the crucifixion to the joy of Easter resurrection! Take strength from God's power present in you as we walk our Lenten journey together.

God chose to reveal his glory not by staying on the throne in heaven, but by coming down to be with us. Philippians 2:6-8 says that Jesus, *"did not regard his equality with God as something to be held on to, as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross."* Christ's glory enters into the struggles from which we try to run away: Suffering, betrayal, confusion, anxiety, grief, loneliness.

GOD WITH US: God reveals his glory by being with us — and not just with us at our best. God is with us at our worst. God is with us when we think He is not; God is with us when we think we've lost him or that He's forgotten us. God is with us when we're feeling empty. God is with us when we're suffering, even when we have caused suffering. When we are heartsick and lonely and confused and scared, God is here and He will not let us go. In Psalm 139 God says, "wherever you go, I am with you... even if you make your bed in Hell, I will be there." That's glory...as God measures glory! God present with us to deliver us.

I think what Peter and James and John saw on the Mount of Transfiguration is what we see in the faces of newborn babies and in sleeping children; what we see in the faces of dear friends who come to us when we need them most. We see glory in an athlete's perfection and a painter's art, we know glory in music sung from the heart and glory in a hug from someone who cares.

VALIDATION: JESUS/US. Jesus is validated by Moses and Elijah and the light of God's cloud of glory witnessed by Peter and James and John. After Jesus was crucified, dead and buried and rose from the dead, the disciples tell what happened that day on the mountain. They witness to others who Jesus is and what God did through him. They witness God's power and God's divine plan, divine purpose, for us children of God. You are not just dust of the earth; you are children of God and you shine with God's glory within you!

BUECHNER/TRUST: Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner and his family were agonizing through their daughter Katherine's battle with anorexia; she was literally starving to death before them and they were trapped in their own helplessness. Medical care and counseling eventually helped Katherine, she is now healthy and doing well. In his book, *Telling Secrets*, Buechner writes "Beneath the questions about food, there were her unspoken questions about love, trust, fear, loss, separation, and these were also my questions. I got so caught up in my daughter's slow starvation that I wasn't aware of the extent to which I myself was starving" (2).

Recalling events and persons in his childhood that created Buechner's insecurity, his doubts, his fear, his loss, he also began to recall and write about small, seemingly insignificant, events and forgotten people who played significant roles in his spiritual journey with God. Events and persons who were for him life-giving, life-changing, transfiguring moments.

"I remember sitting parked by the roadside once," Buechner writes, "terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then. The word was TRUST."

"What do you call a moment like that?" writes Buechner. "Something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? The word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany."

The owner of the car turned out to be a trust officer at a local bank. After reading Buechner's account of the incident, the banker visited Buechner one afternoon and presented him with the license plate itself, which sits propped up on a bookshelf in his study to this day. "It is rusty around the edges and a little battered," he writes, "and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen." (2)

Meeting God in the valley can be as transfiguring as meeting God on the mountain top. Some folks have the mistaken notion that we Christians never have bad times. Not so! Christian joy is deep rooted security that often plays out better in the valley! The Christian walk is a faith, not a feeling. The Word of God is eternal truth; God's truth is not dependent on your feelings! The disciples got a peek at who Jesus really is, the Christ, the Son of God. And when he spoke he spoke the truth.

ONLY JESUS: When the disciples looked up the second time, Moses and Elijah were gone, they saw no one except Jesus. Moses and Elijah's ministries were complete. The only one left on that mountain was Jesus. The only one to look to is Jesus. The only one to listen to is Jesus. Competing beliefs and philosophies disappear in the truth of who Jesus is and his mission of salvation.

ADELE: THE REAL DEAL: Many of you are familiar with British singer and songwriter Adele who has sold millions of songs worldwide. She has won just about every music award you can imagine. She's an international star with a huge fan club, and a host of impersonators.

In 2015, Adele played a prank on a group of her fans. She put on a disguise and went to an audition for Adele impersonators. She introduced herself as "Jenny," a nervous young singer. The other impersonators at the audition spoke about how much they admired Adele and what a great talent she was. After all the other singers had their chance to audition, "Jenny" took the stage. She nervously cleared her throat and began to sing. Despite her disguise, the other contestants recognized her voice. No one else could imitate that magnificent voice. It was the one and only Adele up there on the stage! Some of the contestants began to cry, overjoyed that they were in the presence of the superstar they loved and hoped to imitate. Adele removed her disguise and revealed her identity, to cheers and hugs from her fans. (5)

THE ONE TRUE GOD: In this man Jesus, at this moment, on this mountain, the disciples saw the One True God. No one else could imitate his glory. No one else could speak God's perfect truth. No one else had the power to restore humanity back to God. No one else could do what he could do!

God has revealed his love, his grace, his glory in Jesus! God is here for you to sustain you.  
Don't live in fear of some cosmic "boogie man" God out to get you,  
don't hide in the bushes afraid that God will spotlight you and shame you.  
No! God shines his light to invite you out of your hiding,  
to say help is here, you are forgiven, all is well, welcome home!  
Be not afraid, am here, to deliver you!

Though we may not yet see everything,  
we have seen enough to know we can make it now.  
With God's help we are going to make it through all that life throws our way,  
We're going to make it into the kingdom of God that awaits us beyond the valley!

#### Sources

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