

Transfiguration Sunday – March 3, 2019 - Terri Lynn Friesen

With our grief experiences of late – the coming of Lent seems a bit untimely. Lent is typically about hearing Jesus' invitation to follow him to hard places – through misunderstanding and persecution and betrayal and eventually death. As a congregation and as individuals, we've already been walking in hard places – through cold weather to say the least – and also through grief and death in significant ways.

But this is the week before Lent – it's Transfiguration Sunday – and even though it might seem a little out of context to the particularities of our lives right now to talk about mountain-top experiences – it's an important part of the story – and of the Grand Narrative of how God works in the world, and so after much debate, I decided not to skip over it.

To be transfigured is *'To change into something great or beautiful, in a positive and often spiritual way'*.

And when we talk about "THE Transfiguration" in church, we are generally talking about the story that George read from the book of Luke. **It's also found in Matthew 17, and Mark 9.**

First, a look at the story that we are entering into:

To give us some context, this event happens at a pretty intense time in the disciples' experience of journeying with Jesus. Not too long before they head to the mountain, there is the feeding of the 5000, which is followed by a pretty wild conversation that Jesus has with his disciples about his identity and mission, and Jesus talking about his upcoming death. (at least, if I were a disciple, I would be starting to feel like this is getting pretty wild). Of course, Jesus' life and ministry are pretty familiar to us, but we have to remember this is **not** what the disciples were anticipating – at all.

And so, Jesus takes a few of his disciples – Peter, John and James – up with him to the mountain to get away and pray. This isn't uncommon in Jesus' rhythms....we read about other times and places where

Jesus goes to a mountain or a quiet place to get some solitude, and be alone with God (like in Luke 6, before he invites the disciples to join him, and after the last supper, to the Mount of Olives).

And as we think further back in the Biblical story, people went to the mountain long before Jesus to meet with God. We heard about one of Moses' mountain-top experiences as well this morning, where he meets with God on Mt. Sinai – such an intense experience that his physical appearance is changed, and that the Israelites couldn't look at him.

We as humans have not changed that much - There is still something alluring to many of us about the grandeur, if not the solitude and wilderness, of the mountains. Even before I began reading the text to prepare, I already had in mind what set of mountains drew me into this story. Two summers ago, Thomas and I and two friends did a back-country hike in the traditional Cree lands that we now know as Yoho National Park. A back-country hike in the Rockies was tradition that Thomas and his friend Kristen had for three years running, and I was pretty excited to finally get to crash it this year, and to spend time with Kristen and his friend Fran. I mention this here because I'll talk more about our journey in a bit, but by late summer, after VBS has wrapped up, I am typically pretty ready for some solitude before I have a good imagination and a ready heart for the busy-ness of everything that begins in fall.

We probably can all identify with Jesus' need to get away. His life and work were becoming increasingly politically and spiritually intense, so he chooses a few close friends and heads to a mountain. To connect with God, as was his practice, and like generations before him, and to be grounded for what was to come. And sure enough, it is here, on this mountain, that Jesus does have an intense spiritual experience – as he is praying, his appearance changes – not just his clothes but also his face. And then two other men join him – it is understood that they are Moses and Elijah – and they begin talking about the days to come – what is about to happen to Jesus in Jerusalem.

As I studied this text, the thing that stood out to me initially was NOT the glory and splendor of Jesus and these prophetic figures that show up. I kept being drawn to Peter, and his reaction to the whole event. The text in Luke says, *Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" -- not knowing what he said.* It gives me the impression that Peter seemed uncomfortable with what was going on. Another translation says, he "didn't know what he was saying" when he offered to build some shelters for this holy gathering. And of all the things he could have chosen to do, why build dwellings? The word that is used – tent or dwelling – suggests Peter is connecting this event to the fulfillment of Israel's celebration of the annual Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles). This festival commemorates the Hebrew people's wandering in the wilderness. So Peter was perhaps desperately trying to make connections between his heritage and strange things happening right before his tired eyes. But, as we can't blame Peter for – commentary suggests that Peter really only grasped part of the significance of this event. He wants to freeze this moment in time, to capture it, to stay here, and commemorate the place where it happened. But interestingly and quite fittingly - none of the gospels actually say where they were – you can't go back to the place of Transfiguration. The point of this glorious and miraculous moment is not to capture and contain it – but to continue on, and eventually head down the mountain, to follow Jesus to the cross.

Similarly to Peter, I don't want good things to end. Maybe you are the same. My response, however, is typically to catastrophize about how things are *too* good to truly be good, and will probably end in a disaster or tragedy. If I were Peter, I probably would have worried that Jesus might trip and fall down the mountain. This is how I entered into that backpacking trip in Yoho. We'd been planning the trip since winter: Everything was set up well: the weather was looking good, we had taken some time to plan our route and chosen a pretty relaxed pace, we had enough experience to feel confident in the gear and the food we'd chosen to take along. And I was quite certain that we were about to fall off a mountain or be

eaten by a bear. In fact, I remember spending our first morning of hiking checking behind me in anticipation of said bear.

The bear never came, and by the time we made it to the second last day of our trip, I had relaxed into a bit of a rhythm. The highest climb was behind us, we had made ourselves consume the heaviest food that we had packed, including a 5 lb bag of carrots, which had seemed like a good idea at the time, but I was beginning to seriously begrudge. I was mostly along for the ride at this point – navigation has never been my strong suit, and couldn't remember much about what our last campsite would be like. And so by mid-afternoon, when the path began to clear and we caught glimpses of where we resting for the night, I was actually awe-struck. Not that it hadn't been beautiful all the way along, but this scene actually felt like a mirage. We had descended the path to the most pristine glacial lake I had ever seen. There wasn't another soul around besides the four of us. We scrambled to take off our boots and wade in, and realized that it had a perfect sandy shore. There was just pure delight as we refilled our water bottles, and tried to decide if swimming or setting up camp should come first. The rest of the afternoon was idyllic as we swam, and took in the panoramic beauty around us, and ate the feast of our last evening meal and sat on our makeshift driftwood seats on the edge of the lake, not wanting the sun to go down, because we would get cold and eventually have to crawl into our tents and acknowledge that we could not make it last forever. We were in awe of creation, and in awe of the goodness of God that we might get to experience such beauty in such good company. That feeling that I had - I wonder if this is why Peter wanted to build a dwelling that day.

Awe and wonder and delight in God's presence and goodness – to us particularly and in the world around us are very real and good gifts. But they are certainly not the entirety, nor even the earthly goal, of our pilgrimage of people following the way of Jesus. They need to be held in balance and in right relationship with other aspects of the Grand Narrative of The Way, namely: suffering, and transformation.

I am taking a short-course right now through AMBS with Betty Pries, on Transforming Congregational Conflict and Communication, and we began our course with the discussion of the Grand Narrative of our life in God. The Grand Narrative is the name Betty gives to the patterns we see in God's world. And she uses this slide to show a similar pattern that is given different names, or expressed differently in various contexts, but basically the pattern is about our experience in life, and the experience of humanity as a whole of wonder, suffering, and transformation. Betty talks about first seeing this pattern in an Old Testament class that she took: the characters and contexts changed, but essentially, the pattern was similar: The people of God are faithful, the people of God become unfaithful, and God calls the people back.

Wonder	Suffering	Transformation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Via Illuminativa • Life • Praise • Creation = good • Forming • Faithful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Via Purgativa • Death • Confession • Fall/Sin • Storming • Unfaithful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Via Unitiva • Resurrection • Consolation • Grace • Norming • God calls back

(Betty Pries, Credence & Co. Transforming Congregational Conflict, Week 1)

I see our text today as a part of this narrative: we see this mountain-top experience of the disciples witnessing Jesus' transfiguration as a moment of awe and wonder. But we know from reading on that precedes the suffering of Jesus and his followers, and eventual transformation that is to come in Jesus' resurrection.

What I find helpful about this way of understanding our walk with Jesus is that each part of this spiral is important – we cannot skip over it – but that it has a trajectory – we cannot skip over any of the parts, nor can we stay in them. And I use the word spiral rather than cycle intentionally – because though we cycle through each of these experiences of life – awe and wonder, suffering, and then transformation – it is *because* of the transformation that we do not stay the same.

Jesus needed his time on the mountain to have communion with God, and the disciples needed to witness it in order to have a fuller idea of who Jesus was, and to hear God’s proclamation - "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!". But both Jesus and the disciples needed to come down off the mountain. They could not stop time or live in the radiance of this divine moment forever. Jesus was to journey to the cross to live out the fullness of God’s redemptive love – and the disciples were to follow and bear witness.

Perhaps this theoretical framework is a little too theoretical for your life right now. In moments of deep sadness or grief or loss, in seasons of the dark night of the soul, it can be a lot harder to think, “hey, this experience will end, and I will eventually experience some kind of transformation that leads me out of this and makes me more spiritually mature, and I will one day experience the awe and wonder of God’s goodness again in a new and fresh way.” No, that’s not my point at all.

What I hope you might hear this morning, is that each part of this cycle is equally part of our human experience and our spiritual journey. And, though we may experience it far more tangibly some times than others, God is present in all of it.

So called Mountain-top moments are valid experiences that can be savoured, looked back on with fondness, and trusted as true experiences of the character of God. That was a lesson from my Yoho trip – to learn to savour, and to enjoy an experience with wonder and delight – to trust that it could be truly good. Not to try to make it permanent, or to pack it up and take it home, but to be indwelt by the

goodness of God, and hopefully, let that transform me in some way. I think if we examined the journeys of our lives, we could all name these experiences or seasons – perhaps they are from camp as a child or youth, from your days at RJC or CMU or elsewhere, perhaps your baptism, or another significant milestone in your spiritual journey. Maybe you think of a voluntary service opportunity or your own wilderness experience – literally mountaintop, or otherwise. And maybe you are like me, spending so much time looking for bears that you miss it. Or maybe you can see yourself in Peter: a tendency to commemorate or stay on that mountain, or idolize the glory days, so that you're disappointed in the rest of the journey, because it will never compare to whatever has been 'tabernacled' in your mind. Or perhaps, you've thrown out some mountaintop experiences, because somehow you've heard a gospel that preached that our journey in following Jesus should just be one mountain top after another – and when real life didn't work out that way, you chalked up those experiences, real as they were - to emotional hype and manipulation. That it was actually other Christians that made you discount a genuine encounter with God. I think we are all capable of all of these. And yet, the truth and the richness of our spiritual journey comes from receiving fully from each season – mountaintops yes, and also suffering, and finally transformation. Over and over, and over.

And so, this is what I feel is our invitation as we enter into Lent: to live authentically into whatever season you are in, and to trust that God is present in it all – despite our tangible experience of that moment to moment.

Maybe that looks like choosing a spiritual practice for this season – perhaps picking up a copy of the Lenten guided prayer for your own use – or some other prayer practice. Maybe it is to find some solitude, even for a short time – to seek God's presence in the wilderness. Maybe it is to fast from something. Maybe it is to take something new on. Maybe it is to simply get up in the morning and trust that there is truth in this Grand Narrative – that after suffering, transformation and wonder will come

again. This is not meant to be prescriptive – I trust that the invitation of the Spirit that you might hear is far more creative and personal than anything I can suggest.

May the God who transfigures, suffers and transforms be present to you in the journey. Amen.