

Transfiguring Moments

Luke 9:28-36 by Patty Friesen (Feb.27/22)

Today is Transfiguration Sunday before the first Sunday of Lent and no matter what the lectionary year, whether we are in Matthew, Mark, or Luke's gospel, we always hear the story of the Mount of Transfiguration before Lent. I believe this is to remind us, like Peter, James and John, to keep our eyes on Jesus. One of the ways we keep our eyes on Jesus is through the meal he had with his disciples that we reenact every communion, as we will again today.

Today Jesus goes on a retreat to the mountain to pray with Peter, James and John (v. 28), where he is transfigured or changed into shining light (v. 29). Moses and Elijah appear (vv. 30-33a) to affirm Jesus' authority as a Deliverer like Moses and like a healer like Elijah. And the voice from the cloud speaks the affirmation of Jesus' identity: "This is my Child, my Chosen; listen to him!" Earlier, at the baptism of Jesus, the voice from heaven had spoken to Jesus alone: "You are my Child the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (3:22). Jesus is both the unique child and the chosen Servant in whom God delights and through whom God brings salvation.

This story shows us that at times along the way, for us as for Jesus in this moment, our future may come clear to us, or we may stop momentarily to survey the distance already traveled and the goal ahead, like a hiker in the woods who climbs a tree to get a clear fix on the peak that lies ahead. There are times for retreat for prayer, meditation, and rest, when the shape of the whole may become clear to us. We may also find that in the midst of the struggle, at a bedside or a graveside, the meaning of the gospel and the nature of God become clear to us in ways that transcend ordinary

experience. In the throes of a hard fight for justice, we may discover a purpose or a calling that casts a radiant light over the rest of our lives.

Peter wants to hold onto the moment forever and build tents for all of them to live together forever (v. 33b). But then ironically, if Peter wanted to hang onto the moment, he never mentions it afterwards. Surprisingly, the transfiguration seems to have little impact on the three disciples. They still do not understand what Jesus told them about his death and resurrection. Peter still denies Jesus, and the others look for an earthly kingdom—a restoration of the kingdom of Israel. The implication, therefore, is that the disciples were not transformed by this “mountaintop” experience. As much as they were awed by what they had seen, they were not yet ready to be witnesses. Only later, after the grief of the cross and the joy of the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit would they be ready to speak their witness to what God had done in Jesus. Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced. (New Interpreter’s Commentary)

This transfiguration text came up in my reading through the Anabaptist Prayerbook while I was in Edmonton last month. In a new way I could identify with the disciples who fell on their faces in fear as I drove white-knuckled on icy Hwy 16 to Edmonton peering through rain frozen to my windshield once again to tag-team care with my sister for our ailing mother in hospital. Emotionally, I fell on my face in fear going into the COVID recovery ward and through every day of three hospital transfers, up and down pain management for degenerative disc disease, kidney infection, diabetes and COVID. I feeling on my face in fear riding Light Rail Transit at night with

unmasked teenagers toking up in front of me and homeless men shouting out their internal pain. I've never been so knocked flat by fear and uncertainty as I have these past two months.

This health crisis has not been a transfiguring mountaintop but a transfiguring valley of shadow for our family. Others here who have cared for sick parents or loved ones know the stress of hospital stays and uncertainty of diagnoses. We Friesens have all had to dig deep into our spiritual and relational resources to help us get up in the morning and face whatever the day in hospital brings. Thanks to our parents' example of a relationship with a loving God, we have some orientation to trust and prayer even when everything is going sideways. Thanks to our parents' friendships and good relationships with relatives and church, we are surrounded by people who called and emailed and texted. Mom's friend Dorothy proclaimed, "We prayed your mom out of the grave!" I had actually been praying for Mom's peaceful passing but I didn't stand a chance against her friends.

An unexpected community of friends formed for us in hospital with other families we visited with in the hallways and waiting rooms of the U of A hospital. I call it the community of fellow sufferers - the particular knowing look of eyes over masks.

One of the things Mom and I did together while spending long hours in hospital is that I read through the Laura Ingalls Wilder series from our Osler church library. Mom had read these stories to us at bedtime over 50 years ago so now I was reading them to her. I had comforting images of our childhood on dark cold winter nights in northern Alberta, with freshly bathed bodies in flannel pajamas and flannel sheets tucked in for an adventure to another place and time with young heroine Laura - an astute observer

of family life and culture over 100 years ago. Mom would often fall asleep and I didn't know what to do so I just kept reading *Farmer Boy* aloud for something to do. As I left her room one day, the older man across the hall called out, "I like those stories." He had found his story within *Farmer Boy*.

In *The Spirituality of Reading* by Daniel Coleman, Coleman reflects how when we open the Bible to read the Transfiguration story, we are quietly seated and opening ourselves to the power of the words that our eyes read. This posture of quietness and breathing and reading and openness is a prayerful posture through which we enter the experience of the disciples' fear with their faces on the ground. We are there with them as the smoke clears and they lift their faces from the ground and see only Jesus. In meditatively entering this gospel story we find ourselves within it - our fear, our need for control. Seeing ourselves - we are also reminded to see Jesus.

In the same way, every time we quietly open Laura Ingalls Wilder and read her aloud to sleepy children or patients, we are opening ourselves to her powerful storytelling with descriptions of nature, family life and settler experience. We enter her experiences and perspectives and are made to think about our own. We open our eyes and hearts and spirits through reading, Coleman says and so we must read, read, read - scripture and fiction and non-fiction and poetry.

I'm so thankful for our church library and for librarian Ruth Buhler's intuition of what books might help us grow in our understandings of theology or people who are different from various countries or life experiences. I feel like our church library is holy ground. It's like a chapel off the main sanctuary, a smaller sacred space where we can explore quietly and encounter God or other people who share an enthusiasm for books.

We are shaped by what we read individually but also collectively, over time we are shaped as a community by what we read. I believe God sends us the books we need at the right time - that has happened too often to me to count so I strongly believe reading is one of the ways the Holy Spirit wants to speak to us and open our eyes to our own growth and build empathy and understanding of other people.

Actually, sharing books with congregants and their sharing books with me has become an important part of my ministry. For example, Linda Stucky had recently recommended to me *Truth Be Told* by Beverly McLaughlin the first female Supreme Court Justice and I took McLaughlin with me to Edmonton and reading about her mother's sudden ill health and death was the right thing at the right time for me. I felt less alone reading about someone else going through a similar experience to mine. We feel less alone when we find our experience mirrored in the experience of others; and when we find our story within the larger story of scripture.

In the face down fears of the disciples, we find our own face down fears. In our fears in life as in death, we belong to Christ and we are reminded of this as we partake in the life and death of Christ in communion. Let us prepare for communion with #947 VT.

Leader: Come, with your faith and your doubts, with your hopes and your questions, with your joy and your sadness. You belong here. Come, if you love God and have failed your neighbour, if you are a disciple of Jesus and have betrayed him. You belong here. Come, for this is the table of Jesus, who welcomes strangers and shares his life with old and new Friends. All: We belong here. Leader: Let us take the bread together.

Leader: This meal is filled with life; All: the warmth of the sun, the kindness of the rain, the mysteries of the soil, and the grace of human labour. Leader: As we eat and drink, we give thanks: All: for the goodness of food, the delight of friendship, and the love of Christ in this meal. Leader: Come, Holy Spirit, feast with your people. All: Amen. Leader: Let us take the cup together. We give thanks for these gifts that strengthen our souls, bind us together as one and strengthen us for a life of service. Amen.