

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN
The Transfiguration of the Lord
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Mark 9:2-8

“He was transfigured before them.” Transfigured, utterly changed. The Greek word is “metamorphosis,” a lowly caterpillar transfigured into a magnificent butterfly. In an instant, Peter and James and John saw him in all his glory. He was transfigured.

“*He* was transfigured before them.” This one, this Jesus, the one who had touched lepers and battled demons, who had walked dusty roads, who had gotten tired and hungry, Jesus the lowly, Jesus the humble, Jesus who came among us as one who was human, just like the rest of us—he was the one who was transfigured. The curtain is pulled back, and we see that this one, this ordinary person, is the Son of God.

A preacher friend said of this passage: “I don’t know what to say about this story.” I agree—I don’t know what to say either. Words are the stock and trade of us preachers, but before this transfiguration, this mystery, our pontifications seem so puny.

I can’t explain what happened when Jesus was transfigured. I can only report what it says. His clothes were made resplendently white, brighter than Clorox or Oxiclean can make any clothes on earth. I can only report what it says. With him were Moses and Elijah, the Big Two of the Hebrew scriptures. When Moses and Elijah appear, you know the end is near. And they are here.

“He was transfigured—before them.” Peter and James and John. Why these three, and not the other nine, I do not know. But they are the ones who are taken with Jesus apart to a high mountain. They are the ones who see the transfiguration. It is clear that the entire episode is done for their benefit. “There appeared *to them* Moses and Elijah . . . A cloud overshadowed *them*.” Jesus wants these three disciples to see and hear this event. The transfiguration is for the disciples.

I don't know what to say about it, and actually, neither does Peter. Except, of course, that Peter does say something. Impetuous Peter always says something—a bad case of foot-in-mouth disease. When you stand in the presence of mystery, a good rule of thumb is to be silent. In the presence of mystery, our words get us in trouble.

Many years ago, while serving as pastor of another church, I went to the hospital to visit a couple whose baby had died at birth. Most every couple is excited at the anticipation of a baby's birth, but this couple was more expectant than most, and had gathered all the rest of us up in their anticipation of the birth of their child.

And now, this. So I went to the hospital to sit with them. While there, the door opened, and a nun came in—a Catholic hospital, obviously. It was clear that in the face of death, in the face of this tragedy, this mystery, she didn't know what to say. But she said—I'll never forget it—"Well, God just wanted that baby to be in heaven with him." The couple showed great restraint, I thought, in not throwing a bedpan at the nun. When you stand in the presence of mystery—the mystery of death, the mystery of glory—the best thing to do is to remain silent.

But Peter does not remain silent. He says: "Lord, it is good that we are here. Let us make three booths, one for you and one for Elijah, and one for Moses." His heart is beating nine to ninety as he says it. Peter thinks this is the end of time. The appearance of Moses and Elijah—doesn't that make it the end? The Jewish festival of Booths was an anticipation of the end of time, the time when God would tabernacle, dwell with God's people.¹ "So it's time, Lord," Peter is saying. "Let's make some booths."

But Peter is wrong. He should have remained silent. For this is not the arrival of the end of time. Mark's gospel is only half over. The Transfiguration comes, not at the end of the gospel, but in the middle. What's going on here?

In the passage just before this one, Jesus had told his disciples for the first time what's going on, that they are going to Jerusalem, and there he will be arrested and tried and crucified, and after three days rise. It is clear from their reaction that the disciples had never expected Jesus to say anything like that.

¹ David Nineham, *St. Mark* (Pelican NT Commentaries), quoted in Tom Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, p. 101.

Then Jesus ups the ante, and says to them: “If any would come after me, let them deny self and take up their cross and follow me.” To be a disciple of Jesus means to be in places of suffering and death.

But before that long and sorrowful journey starts, Jesus takes these three disciples to the top of the mountain, and is revealed in all his glory. The curtain is pulled back, and they see Jesus as he truly is. And lest there be any doubt, the voice of God comes from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.”

It is a moment of grace. Jesus knows that the way ahead will be difficult and painful. There will be times when they wonder whether it is worth it. So before the journey begins, Jesus shows his glory. “Hold onto this moment,” he seems to be saying. “You will need this memory when the soldiers come, and when death is strong in the air.”

The Transfiguration is for the benefit of the disciples. That is, the Transfiguration is for us. The curtain is pulled back, and we see Christ in all his glory. “This is my Beloved Son.” So on the days when it gets tough, when we wonder whether faith in Jesus is worth it, when we ask: “Lord, are you really the Son of God?” remember this moment. Jesus is transfigured before them, and us.

It’s just a glimpse. Yet if we have ears to hear and eyes to see, we can catch glimpses of the glory of God scattered throughout our world.

Someone told me recently that I ought to check out the speech that was given to the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington earlier this month. The prayer breakfast must be quite an event, a time of prayer, certainly, but a time to see and be seen. Here are the powerful people of our nation gathered together for this time of prayer.

The speaker, it turned out, was Bono, the lead singer for the rock group U2. Bono has also become a passionate advocate for the poor, and has a special interest in the needs of people in Africa. So I googled Bono’s speech, and found it on line. Here is a part of what he said:

One thing we can all agree, all faiths, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor. God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunities and lives, and God is with us if we are with them. “If you remove the yoke from your midst, the point of the finger and speaking wickedness,

and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness, and your gloom will become like midday, and the Lord will continually guide you and satisfy your desire in scorched places.”²

Did the powerful people in Washington see it that day? The curtain was pulled back, and the glory of God was revealed by a rock singer.

I was up visiting with Murray and Mary Jane Miles this week after Murray’s heart surgery. They gave me permission to share with you the comments of their granddaughter Sara. When he heard that her granddaddy was going to have surgery on his heart, she asked in grave concern: “They won’t let God out, will they?” “What do you mean?” they asked. “You know,” she replied, “God is in your heart.” It was a transforming moment, right there in that hospital room amid beeping machines and blinking readouts—a transfiguring moment.

Jesus is transfigured before the disciples, before us. We can’t explain it, but only behold it. Author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner puts it this way:

I have been surrounded by the whiteness of the snow. I have heard a stillness that encloses all sounds stilled the way whiteness encloses all colors stilled, the way wordlessness encloses all words stilled. I have sensed the presence of a Presence. I have felt a promise promised.

I like to believe that once or twice, at times like those, I have bumbled my way into at least the outermost suburbs of the Truth that can never be told but only come upon, that can never be proved but only lived for and loved.³

Jesus was transfigured before them. We can’t explain it. We can only proclaim it, and be alert to those thin places in our world where we behold the glory of the Lord. †

² Bono’s remarks to the National Prayer Breakfast, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2006. Online version.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, p. 105-6, quoted by Patrick Willson, Shades Valley Presbyterian Church, February 10, 1991.