

Accompany

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

February 14, 2021

Transfiguration Sunday (Year B)

Mark 9:2-9



Montreat is a special place for many Presbyterians. It is a conference center nestled in the magnificent mountains of Western North Carolina with roots in the PC(USA). I have experienced the sacredness of Montreat many times throughout my life from accompanying my mother for conferences as a child, to impactful youth conferences, to treasured family trips, to learning opportunities through the Music & Worship and Women's Connection conferences.

Whenever I have the joy of escaping to Montreat, I never want to leave and have pondered this week exactly why that is. The beauty of the mountains certainly draws me outside to take in the splendor of creation whether the trees are filled with lush green leaves, painted with the vibrant autumn foliage, or strikingly bare allowing the light to shine brighter.

I love hiking to the top of Lookout Mountain where I feel as if I can touch the sky while awaiting a breathtaking sunrise or taking in the gorgeous landscape below. Regardless of who accompanies me up the mountain, I am never the first one to suggest we head back down. I could stay up there all day experiencing the awe and wonder of God's creation.

As much as I love the beauty of Montreat, it is not the only reason I feel compelled to stay each time I visit. I long to stay because I have had mountaintop experiences at Montreat not due to its location but because of the nearness I have felt to God. Mountaintop experiences are those moments when you feel the fullness of God. Moments when God's light shines so bright that you want to remain in that moment forever experiencing God's presence.

Jesus being transfigured on the top of that high mountain is one of these moments. According to Mark, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him up a high mountain, which alerts us to pay attention since in Scripture mountains signify importance, but then Jesus doesn't say or do anything while on the mountain. It is God who transfigures Jesus right before their eyes and makes Elijah and Moses to appear before this inner circle of disciples.

Impulsive Peter quickly exclaims that it is good for them to be there on that mountain and offers to make three dwellings- one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. This is a mountaintop experience for Peter, and he wants to build these dwellings so they can all stay there. Peter is experiencing the fullness of God so I understand why he wants to do whatever he can to allow them to remain basking in the light.

At the end of each Montreat Youth Conference, there were inevitably tears. We had experienced the fullness of God in worship, in our small groups with others from across the country, in conversations with friends, and in creation, and we didn't want to go back down the mountain at the end of the week. We wanted to remain in the glow of God's light.

Life feels extraordinary during these mountaintop experiences. We feel the warmth of God's presence as close as our next breath and don't want to go back down into the ordinary and mundane moments of life. Montreat Youth Conferences made me want to build dwellings and stay indefinitely.

But here's the catch- we cannot live our lives completely on the mountaintop. The purpose of these experiences isn't for us to remain in the bubble of that moment. These glimpses of God, these mountaintop experiences, these transfiguration moments, not only transform us but also accompany us. After they mold and shape us, they stay with us as we journey back down the mountain and sustain us through the valleys of life.

Jesus doesn't speak on the mountain, but a voice comes from the cloud. In this moment we remember that throughout Scripture clouds signify divine presence and immediately know it is the voice of God. This is only the second time God speaks in Mark's gospel. The first was at Jesus' baptism where God speaks only to Jesus saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." This time God speaks to the disciples saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

When God speaks to Peter, James, and John, God is speaking to all of Jesus' disciples, and as disciples, we are to receive these words directly from God, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" God is telling us to listen to Jesus, but Jesus doesn't speak a single word on the mountain. Think back for a moment to our Scripture reading. Do you remember how it begins? "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John..."

At the end of the previous chapter, Jesus had foretold his death and resurrection. He had taught them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected and killed, and after three days rise again. Then six days later, God is

now imploring the disciples to listen to Jesus, to trust what Jesus is saying, and to respond accordingly.

In this moment when God speaks to Peter, James, and John from the cloud and commands them to listen, the disciples “evolve from spectators to witnesses, those who listen with the intent to embrace and embody what they hear and observe as most divinely true.¹” Are we merely spectators or are we witnesses? Do we listening with the intent to embrace and embody divine truth?

When we listen as witnesses, we are opening ourselves up to be transformed, allowing these light-filled experiences to accompany us into all parts of our life, and then reflect this radiant light. This isn’t easy and can take time, but if we let our transfiguration experiences accompany us, they will shape of living.

Transfiguration Sunday is a pause in our church year that invites us to remember Jesus’ identity before we enter the season of Lent where we focus on Jesus’ time in the wilderness and ultimately his death and resurrection. The Transfiguration reminds us that this Lenten journey is from glory to glory. Through the Transfiguration Jesus’ glory shines brighter than we can comprehend, and from here we will journey through the darkness of the Lenten wilderness finally arriving at the resurrection where we will again experience God’s glory beyond imagination.

We cannot extend these mountaintop experiences where we feel the radiance of God’s glory, but they can accompany us back down the mountain. These extraordinary moments, where we recognize God’s nearness, stay with us and sustain us the wilderness of Lent and in the valleys of life. They also allow us to recognize God in the ordinary which we will learn more about in our Growth Group book, *Lent in Plain Sight*, as Jill Duffield helps us recognize God at work through ordinary objects. Amazingly, God can make even the mundane holy when we have eyes to see.

With my description of these mountaintop moments, we could easily assume they are always filled with happy experiences, but that wouldn’t be true. I described them as moments where we experience the nearness of God not moments where we are filled with happiness. Mark tells us that the disciples were terrified on the mountain, and many of the times I have felt closest to God have been in the midst of pain and fear when I most needed to feel God’s presence. The nearness of God can be overwhelming, but as angels often remind us, “Do not be afraid.”

¹ Smith, Shively T. J., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, p. 321, Louisville, WJK, 2020

We don't fully understand these mountaintop moments because God is beyond our comprehension or imagination, but what we do know is that God always initiates. God's light transfigures, but we must be open to recognizing these transformational experiences. It is natural that we want to stay basking in the light of these transfiguration moments, but thankfully God allows these experiences to accompany us and help us to listen to Jesus in all moments.

As I pondered the impact of the Transfiguration on myself as an individual and on us as a faith community, the final words of Amanda Gorman's powerful poem *The Hill We Climb* flowed through my mind, "For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."

Friends, God's light is always shining, if only we're brave enough to recognize it, if only we're brave enough to reflect it.

May the image of Jesus' dazzling brightness accompany us down the mountain and into the wilderness, may this light sustain us as we await God's glory, and may it move us to listen and be brave enough to reflect the light in this world that God created. Amen.