

## *Transfiguration*

A Sermon on Matthew 17:1-9 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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In my mature years, the Transfiguration has come to be one of my favorite stories in the New Testament. This is a story that appears to be completely unrelated to anything you and I have experienced, yet it points toward one of the deepest needs in our lives. We know we must be changed by God's love, or else an important part of us will fade and die. The story of the Transfiguration points toward our need to be changed by God's love.

There is a part of our journey with God that is unchanging. The unchanging aspect is that the journey is always about a collection of activities and understandings that we describe with a single word: love. And yet, our journey with God is also one that requires us to be changed. It is a journey that requires us to be changed in ways we do not expect. Let's consider what we learn about the journey from the story of the Transfiguration.

In our journey, we are not the leaders. This might come as a shock to us in the twenty-first century, surrounded as we are by a culture of self-determination. If we seek to be on a journey with God, we are not going to be leading ourselves.

In the story, *Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them.* In this story, you and I are like Peter, James, and John. We have to be willing to follow where we are being led. For us this will almost certainly not take the form of a thirty-year-old man, with long hair and brown eyes, wearing traditional middle-eastern clothing, asking us to follow him up a high mountain. Yet, for once, we must be willing to be led.

In our journey, there are times when we have to get away from our familiar place and familiar work and people. In the story, *Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.* In our journey sometimes we need time alone, or time apart, in order to follow where God is leading us.

In our journeys with God, completely unexpected events happen. In today's Gospel, *Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.*

In your life and my life, the unexpected events can be creative and positive. You might begin a new, unexpected chapter of your work at the age of 40, or 60, or 80 years old. You might find yourself as part of a family you are unexpectedly claiming as your own.

Sometimes, the unexpected events of our lives are tragic. An earthquake destroys your city. A cruel tyrant sends an army to invade your country. Someone you love dies long before you expected.

In our journeys with God, we often don't know how to respond to these unexpected events. Peter provides the perfect illustration of not knowing how to respond. *Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."*

Just like Peter, when life takes an unexpected turn, we often respond with words and actions that appear to be sensible. But Peter's words, and our responses to unexpected events, often emphasize that we have no idea about how to respond.

Though we might find no coherent response in ourselves, eventually we receive guidance about the way to move forward. In Peter's case, *While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"*

It is pretty likely you and I won't receive guidance in the form of a mighty voice thundering from the heavens. Yet I have no doubt that we will receive the guidance we need, if only we will

listen. The wisdom you receive might include many words or no words. It might be loud as thunder or soft as rain. You might receive it in the natural world or on a grimy subway train. Yet I have no doubt that you and I will be in the presence of powerful, wise direction about the way to move forward. It will be our work to listen.

In our journey, even at the moment when we are in the presence of guidance that will help us move forward, we are often overcome with fear or other emotions. This is the situation in today's Gospel. *When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."*

You might not be the kind of person who would be overcome with fear. You might be overcome with anger or shame or some other sort of emotion. The fear, anger, and shame are not signs of failure; they are part of the journey, as long as we understand that fear, anger, and shame are not the destination. We have to move through them.

In our journeys with God, these times of unexpected change and equally unexpected revelation are fleeting. In the case of Peter, James, and John, *when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.* We seek to be changed by God's love, yet the unexpected events, the transformative experiences, of our lives often come and go very quickly. So we try to let go of the past. We try to not be anxious about the future. We try to be present to what is happening in this moment. We try to be reflective about the present moment. We try to develop relationships of trust with one another and with God. We know we must be changed by God's love if we hope to be fully ourselves.

If the story of the Transfiguration seems a bit overwhelming, do not be discouraged. If the unexpected events or changes of your life seem overwhelming, do not be discouraged. You are not on the journey alone. We are together in order to support one another in our common journey. Trust that we are together in this place for a reason.

In the same spirit, trust that God is leading you in this moment of your life. This is one of the central, good things in our lives. You may realize that you don't really know exactly where you are headed in your life. If you come to this realization, give thanks, because we never really know exactly where we are headed. Trust that God is leading you in the direction of love.

Our collect for the day includes these words: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross and be changed into his likeness.

This is our prayer. Grant to us that we may be in a relationship of faith, in a relationship of trust, with you, our creator. Grant that through this relationship of trust we may behold your vision for us. Grant that, strengthened by this relationship and this vision, we might bear the particular, heavy burdens of our lives. Grant that, through our relationship with you and through our engagement in this work, we would be changed. Grant that the changes that happen in us would move us closer to your vision of love. Grant to us that we would be changed into Christ's likeness.