

Transfiguration Sunday, February 26, 2017
Exodus 24:12-18 Luke 9:28b-37 Pastor Bill Chadwick

28 ... Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 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. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Let's walk our way through this amazing passage. Where were they? On a mountain. Which mountain? We don't know for sure. The gospel writers often use mountains metaphorically anyway. The high mountain symbolizes the place where heaven and earth meet—the place where God is revealed. *The high mountain is also reminiscent of Mount Sinai, where Moses encountered God with such great consequence.* –Dick Donovan

What is Jesus doing? He's praying. He's purposely taking time out from his ministry to concentrate on his relationship with God. He's intentionally relating to the Divine, seeking God's will and submitting to it. Throughout his gospel Luke highlights prayer. And contrasts it with sleeping. (Patrick J. Willson) The disciples in this case were heavy-lidded, but because they were awake this time they saw this astonishing event.

While praying, the appearance of Jesus' face changed. The word in the Greek is *metamorphe*, like our word *metamorphosis*. Which always reminds us of what? Caterpillars into butterflies. How many of you at some point have put a monarch caterpillar into a jar with milkweed leaves and waited and watched for metamorphosis to take place? I did that a number of times when I was a kid. Waiting for the caterpillar to stop munching the leaves and start spinning the chrysalis. Then waiting and watching the seemingly lifeless chrysalis, while hid from our eyes the creature inside is transforming. Then finally the chrysalis starts to move a little bit. Then a tiny hole. A mouth breaks through and the butterfly eats its way out, and then sits there in its glory. We wait some more as the wings dry, the butterfly slowly opens and closes its wings and then, finally, our waiting is rewarded: lift off, and the gorgeous orange and black creature flutters into the sky, a thing of lightness and beauty and grace, resembling the caterpillar in no recognizable way. The whole process leaves us wordless in awe.

Did you ever wonder *why* would God do that? Create that process of metamorphosis instead of just having the eggs grow straight into butterflies? Is God just showing off? Actually, it's simply one of the *many* daily miracles to which we all are privy, if we have eyes to see.

As you know, the butterfly symbolizes resurrection. And it's entirely appropriate to celebrate it every day.

Metamorphosis, transformation, is not just for Jesus and not just for caterpillars, it's for you and me.

- John Wesley, at a revival service, felt his heart “strangely warmed.” He responded “Yes” to Jesus, and began a movement—Methodism—that transformed the world, and that is still having wonderful effect two centuries after his death.
- Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest, told the story of a family he met while he was ministering in Peru. When Rodolfo Quiroga was eight years old, a deranged neighbor murdered his brother. Rodolfo's parents were beside themselves with grief, and his father walked around the house with a gun, talking wildly of revenge.

"(But when the father) realized that he still had a caring wife and three boys who needed him, he slowly became a different man. While he had always been a fervent atheist and was married under the condition that the Church would have nothing to do with him and his family, in his grief he suddenly turned to God and became a man who committed his life to prayer, charity, and the spiritual well-being of his family.

Both he and his wife started to go to church every day. Soon afterwards, their three sons were baptized and received their first communion. The house of this simple family became a place of faith and hope." (from Henri Nouwen, *Gracias! A Latin American Journal*) Transformation. Metamorphosis.

William Barclay writes of a simple workman in London whose friends were teasing him after he had said yes to Jesus and become a follower and regular churchgoer. “What, do you really believe that Jesus changed water into wine and all that rot?”

He quietly answered, “I don't know about Jesus changing water into wine, but I know in my home he changed beer into furniture.”

I've seen people transformed. Transformed. Through the spiritual renewal movement known as *cursillo*. Through the prayers of a grandma. Through the gentle and steady encouragement of a loving spouse through the years... Metamorphosis.

Back to Luke. Jesus' face became charged with glory, his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly who appeared and started talking to Jesus? Moses and Elijah. (Now, just to be clear for those of you who might be a little fuzzy on your biblical history: Moses had been dead for 1200 years and Elijah for 800.)

These guys are Big Deals. In the Old Testament Hall of Fame they are Babe Ruth and Willie Mays. For the Jews there is no bigger event in their communal history than the Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. And, of course, during the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness Moses received the Ten Commandments from God...on the mountain. And Elijah, greatest of the prophets, was expected to return as a forerunner of the Messiah. So metaphorically and theologically, we have here the law and the prophets confirming that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of God.

“They appeared in glory and were speaking of (Jesus’) departure...”; “departure” meaning what? Presumably his death and resurrection...

As Moses and Elijah are leaving, Peter comes up with what he thinks is a brilliant idea: let's build a booth (a tent, a dwelling) in honor of Moses, Elijah, Jesus. A lasting tribute to what went on here. Why? Sort of like a National Register of Historic Places plaque?

We don't really know what Peter was thinking. But the need to *do something* is entirely in keeping with what we know about Peter. Remember when the disciples are out in the boat and the storm comes up on the Sea of Galilee, it was night, and a violent storm came up? They saw Jesus walking on the water toward them. Which disciple said, “Hey, I wanna walk on the water, too”? Peter. And at the very end of Jesus' ministry, there in the Garden of Gethsemane when the priests and their guards came to arrest Jesus, which disciple pulled out a sword and started swinging wildly? Peter. The man of action. But sometimes the appropriate response to a holy event is: *Don't just do something, stand there.*

While Peter was suggesting this building project, “a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.” Terrified. Would you be terrified? I would! It's an entirely appropriate response. Why were they afraid? They knew they were in the presence of Almighty God...and they responded appropriately.

We all like the comforting stories of God: God coming in a little baby, and coming to us today in a cube of bread and a shot glass of juice. Yes, absolutely... but...at the same time...we are talking about *ALMIGHTY GOD!*—painter of sunsets, flinger of stars, Creator of two trillion galaxies...

There is a famous quote by Annie Dillard that never fails to make me squirm. I fear that we, or at least I, often do not approach God with the sort of awe and reverence that the Holy One deserves. Here's the quote:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.
(repeat)

And finally the climax of this astonishing story, verse 35: "Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Echoes of Jesus' baptism. But then only Jesus heard the voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Now the inner circle of disciples hear the voice. "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

How well do we listen? How much time in a week do we spend listening to radio and television and social media? And how much time do we spend listening to Jesus?

"Listen to him." When we join the church each of us declares that "Jesus is my lord and savior." "Lord" means "boss;" more than that: "ultimate authority." We solemnly pledge that we are going to do what *he* says, over anyone else. The teachings of Jesus are very different from the values of our society, especially now. And anyone who reads the gospels knows that. Listen to Jesus.

So how do we listen to Jesus? Read the gospels, at a minimum—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—so you know what he's all about. Then WWJD, asking ourselves "What would Jesus do?" is helpful. Pray...and in our prayer, not just talk to God, but listen... (Oh, that's hard for me.) Participate in worship each week. Take part in Bible studies, the PW circle studies, or the Parables Class, next one is a week from Thursday at 9:30 AM. Now, I recognize that a weekday morning doesn't work for many of you, but it would work for dozens and dozens of you... read faithful Christian magazines like *Presbyterians Today*, *Sojourners* or *Christian Century*. When it comes time to make a big decision ask for advice from your mature Christian friends, and your pastors.

If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember the voice of God saying to Peter and James and John...and me...and you, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

Amen!