

Transforming Moments

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher

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Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

Our theme for this program year is “Telling our Story!” As we think about our own stories of faith, it is helpful to get some guidance from the people who bear witness to Jesus and how they absorbed the good news of God’s love. For the season of Lent, we will hear stories from the pages of the Bible, told in different ways and with different media. We will hear how people of the Bible came to love God and as a result, how their lives changed. For Lent, Mary and I will use part of our Mission Statement of Loving God...Changing lives. In the weeks before Easter, we will see in different ways how those dots between Loving God and Changing lives are filled. Today at the threshold of Lent, we have the spectacular, albeit difficult bible passage, Transfiguration. Here is how the gospel of Matthew records it for Christian believers: **Matthew 17:1-9**

¹Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and his brother John, and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him. ⁴Then 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.” ⁵While 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!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

This is the Word of the Lord; **Thanks be to God.**

Let us listen to Peter’s story:

If only I knew then what I know now! If only I had an inkling of what was going to happen, maybe things would have been different. I was born Simon son of Jonah, but you know me as Peter, disciple of Christ. You know me after all that has happened. Believe me, when you are in the middle of it, things don't make too much sense. You see, I spent three years with this man. Three years following Him, listening to Him, arranging things for Him, yet never quite getting a full grasp as to what was happening. Even now, I don't think I understand the entire story. I don't know why He had to suffer and die, but when I look back upon his life, when I look back upon my own life, some things start to fall into place.

You know what happens to our Lord. You know about his suffering and death about this cross that is behind me, because you know it in the context of the victory of the resurrection. We did not have such a perspective. In a sense, we were making it up as we went along.

I had my own idea of what I wanted to happen. The last thing that I wanted is to have it end the way it did. Even in my own narrow view of things, I did know in my heart that what happened on that mountain was something special. They later called it a transfiguration, but for me it was a transformation. We listened to Jesus, we did not speak about it. Who would believe us? Things were never the same after that day.

Now, in the context of the empty cross, in the context of the resurrection, I want to share with you my story of what happened on that mountaintop that has made all the difference.

They used to call me Simon the fisherman. My brother Andrew and I followed our father, Jonah, into the family fishing business. I never thought of doing anything else. I make a living from the sea. The smell of fish and the sea is what I know. I never thought that anything could transform me!

Even a tried and true fisherman can change his course. One day, Andrew and I saw a crowd gathering by the shore. There was a man who was speaking. To this day, I do not know what made us stop to listen. Different traveling rabbis have appeared along the coast before. I never had much time for their words. I had work to do and a family to feed.

For whatever reason, Andrew and I stopped to listen to Jesus. That day unsettled me and made me want to hear more. We stayed all afternoon and into the evening. It felt like He was talking directly to me. He knew what I needed even when I did not.

We invited Jesus to come home with us. Jesus turned it around and invited us to join Him, not as the fishermen that we were but to use us to bring others to hear his message. And we did. Now I am sure our families thought we were crazy. What did I know about the ways of God -- I was a fisherman not a rabbi. My family also knew that once I made up my mind there was no stopping me, and I wanted to know more about what Jesus was saying.

Andrew and I announced that we were leaving fishing for a while, not forever mind you, we just wanted to find out more about this man. I remember when we made this startling announcement. I did so with such confidence and authority, but inside I was shaking. "Simon," I kept saying to myself, "What are you doing? This time you are over your head." And yet I knew in my heart that the sea and the work that I have always loved would be meaningless if I didn't go and find out more about this man, Jesus. I had to follow Him, and so I did.

In the three years, I got to know Him and truly care for Him, He gave new meaning to the old ways and gave my life purpose. He taught me about love, a word I never thought much about -- how God loves me and how I could love in return. At times, we would try to protect Him, but that ended up being futile. We, his close group of friends, would worry about Him. We felt that He was only human and He could only do so much. You see we didn't know. We really didn't know. I wanted Him to stop standing up to the leaders of the Temple. He was angering them and they were not listening to his message. I thought that Jesus was politically naive and that He did not know how influential those leaders were. You cannot publicly humiliate the powers that be and get away with it. Every time the Pharisees and Sadducees would challenge Him, Jesus would meet their challenges and leave them sputtering or even speechless.

I would argue with Him, "Teacher, how do you expect me to protect you if you keep challenging these powerful folks? I can't keep you safe if you keep this up." He just gave me a knowing smile. I realized how much I believed in

my own strength. I realized that there was much more at stake than our physical safety. Back then, I did not understand. If there was a problem, these hands could fix it. I could take care of it.

I won't lie; it really troubled me when Jesus started predicting his arrest and death. "How can He say these things," I thought. "Doesn't He have faith that this will work out. I would never let such things happen to Him if I can help it." How easy we set ourselves up as our own little gods. In reality, my attempts to protect Him were working against what He was called to do.

Before those dark days of betrayal, denial and death, there was this time on the mountain. That was my transforming moment. At that point, in Jesus' ministry things were going well. Jesus' popularity with the people could not have been better. He had just finished teaching and as was his normal pattern, He left the crowds for some prayer and quiet time. We were sitting talking quietly when Jesus looked into my eyes and asked, Simon, who am I?

I had been with Him for almost three years and out of the blue, He asks me who He is? The others stopped talking and waited for my reply. Although I never asked that same question aloud, I wondered to myself who He was. I met his gaze and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Have you ever had one of those times when you look back and think it wasn't your words coming out of your mouth but that you were inspired by something greater than you? It was not I talking and yet they were the truest words that I have ever uttered. When Jesus asked me that question, things seemed to fall right into place. He was not just teacher or even a prophet. He was the one all of those have been pointing to. Here, standing before us was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. It was a moment that transformed me. From that time on, Jesus called me Peter, which means rock. The world now knows me as Peter, and so I am continually reminded of that transforming day.

A few days later, Jesus took James, John and me away to the top of a mountain. At that time, a change was occurring; Jesus was becoming more reflective, more aloof from the rest of us. The three of us were wondering why we were brought up to this mountain when IT happened. It was an experience too great for words. There was a bright light and then I swear this happened; there sat Moses and Elijah. We knew who they were immediately. I am not sure how. No one alive ever had seen them. There was such a feeling of

ecstasy that I have never experienced before. Our hearts burned being in their presence. It was frightening and wonderful all at the same time. In the midst of all of it, we knew that Jesus, our friend Jesus, was greater than Moses and Elijah. Whew! Jesus is truly the Christ, the son of the living God. Whatever doubts I had, surely faded in the glory of this experience. As quickly as it came, the vision left. I am sure that the entire experience was no longer than a few seconds, but to me it was a lifetime.

My first reaction was that this had to be shared. People who were not sure about Jesus had to know about this experience. My thoughts were racing. Let us do something to mark this spot so no one will ever forget. It was important that this experience would not fade and die with our memories. Some kind of commemoration or something tangible should be placed here to remind people what just happened. Then we can take people here a show them once and for all who Jesus is and He will be protected. No one would dare harm the One who God calls beloved Son!

Once again, I got it wrong. Jesus told us to be silent, not to tell anyone. Just when I thought everything made sense, He turns it around and confuses me. Here was this marvelous event, and we were to keep it to ourselves. I did not understand!

I did not realize that once again my self-interest was betraying me. I wanted to share and reconstruct the experience so I would not forget it. I was relying on my own human hands rather than on God. It was the power of the Spirit that led me to this experience and the Spirit would not let this mere mortal ever forget what occurred. God would not let God's son fade into obscurity. Those who love God, those lives can be changed.

If I had had my way, that amazing experience would have been dissected and exploited and twisted for human gain. The event itself would have overshadow the holiness of the moment.

That experience on the mountain changed my life. I still make plenty of mistakes and I still jump in trying to save my own life and others. I found the truth that day. That truth has a way of changing how you look at things. There are times when I have not acted in ways that show that truth. There are times when I spoke before I thought. I can accept that part, painful as it may be,

because I know who Jesus truly is. God's love is engraved upon my heart. I did not leave that experience on the mountain; I did not leave the knowledge of who Christ is in a shrine or temple but it travels with me. That experience is not an end in itself but a beginning, a beginning of knowing that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God and so it was a transforming moment.

I hope you can think about how loving the living God changes your life. I hope you can see how those dots between Loving God and Changing lives reside in your own story. When even one life changes, there is hope that the world can change. Thanks be to God. Amen.