

A GLIMPSE OF GLORY

Luke 9:28-36

*In the midst of life, we are empowered
by evidence of God's reality.*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
March 3, 2019

Transfiguration Sunday reminds me of a story about a man who began thinking one day about his wife and how much he loved her. It wasn't Valentine's or her birthday or their anniversary, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had really taken her for granted for a long, long time. So he decided to leave the office early that day and do something special for this woman he loved.

He went to the big department store in town and bought a huge bottle of her favorite perfume. Then he went to the local florist and bought her a dozen long-stemmed red roses. Then he stopped by the candy store and got her a box of her favorite chocolates. Finally he made it home and walked in the door and presented her an armload of gifts.

He was right in the middle of telling his wife how much he loved her and adored her and appreciated her, when she broke down in tears and began sobbing. But they were not tears of joy; she was upset. The man was totally confused and just stood there with this bewildered expression on his face.

"What's this?" he said, "I thought these things would make you happy."

Through her tears his wife said, "This has been the worst day of my life. We lost our biggest account at the office; my co-workers were obnoxious; the boss was in a bad mood; and my clients were totally unreasonable. And then I come home, and the house is a wreck, the kids are running all over the place, the housekeeper got mad and quit, the water heater broke, and one of the toilets overflowed. And then, to top it all off, you come home, and you're drunk!"

Well, the man wasn't drunk at all. His wife was just in no frame of mind to receive his gifts. Can you relate? Sometimes we get so focused on the negative that we miss the good that's going on all around us. We can get so caught up in our problems and so overwhelmed by life that we wouldn't know a blessing if it slapped us in the face.

This week has rocked our little Methodist world. The General Conference was a day of prayer, then three days of conflict, division, protests, and pain. Some people were pleased with the outcome; others were sad and hurt; others were angry. It probably marked a turning point for our denomination, but nobody is sure at this point which direction it turned.

Apart from global church politics, most of us have enough problems of our own—deaths of loved ones, chronic and acute illnesses, conflict in our own family, concerns over other national and international tragedies. These burdens on our heart and soul can keep us from hearing and receiving the Good News God has for us today.

I want to invite you today to open up your life to receive a blessing. Can you let your problems and your anxieties slide for a few minutes? Can you let your defenses down for just a little while so you can get a glimpse of God's glory? Let's invite God now to help us experience a moment of transfiguration.

Today we are ending the season of Epiphany with the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, one of the most remarkable epiphanies in the Bible. We can understand better what this story means for our life today if we place it in context. A few days before the Transfiguration, according to Luke, Jesus was praying with his disciples, and he asked, "Who are people saying that I am? What's the word on the street?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist (who had recently been executed), some say Elijah (who was supposed to return before the Kingdom of God came), or another prophet."

Jesus asked, "Who do you think I am?"

Peter, for the first time, gave voice to what the disciples were coming to believe: "*You are the Messiah of God.*"¹

Then, to the great surprise of everyone, Jesus did not lay out the plan by which they were going to overthrow the Romans and re-establish the Jewish state. He began to describe instead how he was going to endure great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders of the time, be arrested and killed, only to rise again after three days. This was incredible news—*incredibly bad news!* Then Jesus continued by telling the disciples what it meant to follow him: "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.*"²

These are two crucial revelations: the amazing news that Jesus is the Messiah, and the awful news that the Messiah will suffer and calls his

disciples to suffer as well. The disciples were overwhelmed trying to make sense out of it all.

A few days later, Jesus took Peter and James and John up on a mountain to pray. While Jesus was praying, his face and clothing began to shine with a supernatural glory. Then two men appeared and talked with Jesus. At some point the disciples figured out that these men were Moses and Elijah. They spoke of the departure of Jesus from the world. Then Peter got up and began to scurry around to build shelters for the three glorified men. Sometimes when you're overwhelmed, you just try to stay busy with meaningless tasks.

Then a cloud overshadowed the mountain. But this was no ordinary cloud. It was the cloud of God's presence, and the voice of the Holy One spoke from the cloud and said, "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*"³ Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was all over. The disciples lifted their faces from the ground, and there stood Jesus all alone.

Was it even real? Did it really happen? Whatever happened, the disciples didn't tell anybody what they had seen or heard. It was only after the death and resurrection of Jesus that they let it be known what had happened that night on the mountaintop.

The Transfiguration is a great event in the life of Christ, but it takes on even greater significance when you understand the rich background of the story. The transfigured face of Christ was not new; Moses' face had a glorious shine to it when he met God on Mt. Sinai. The appearance of Moses and Elijah is not random, either. Moses was the great lawgiver; Elijah was the father of the prophets. So their appearance signifies the testimony of the Law and Prophets of Israel to the Messiah, who is Jesus. The departure they talk about is the coming passion of Christ, his "way out" of the world.

The cloud that overshadows the mountain is reminiscent of the cloud that overshadowed Mount Sinai when Moses met with God to get the Ten Commandments. In Hebrew it is called the *shekinah*, or cloud of glory. Out of the cloud comes the voice of God, as it did to Elijah on the holy mountain. God had also spoken to Jesus at his baptism, when the Voice

said almost the same exact words directly to Jesus, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased.*”⁴

The glory of Jesus revealed on the mountain that night is a “foretaste of glory divine,”⁵ a glimpse into the future of the resurrected Christ. First he must endure the passion and the cross, but then comes the resurrection and glory everlasting. They didn’t understand it at the moment, but looking back with post-resurrection eyes, they could see it clearly.

What do we do with this Transfiguration story in our context of life today?

I think the Transfiguration is first of all an experience of **confirmation**. The disciples were overwhelmed just trying to understand Jesus, to make sense out of the fact that the Messiah could suffer. They seemed to have forgotten the main thing—that Jesus is the Messiah! On the mountain that night, they saw again that Jesus is the glorious Son of God. He could be trusted. They could follow him to the end.

We get so overwhelmed sometimes that we forget that there is a God who is able to overcome any difficulty we face. We feel like we have a spoonful of peanut butter, and our bread is the size of a football field; we’re just spread too thin. There’s too much going on, too many people needing us, too many problems, too many responsibilities. We feel like Peter on the mountain, scurrying around, riding the emotional roller coaster, doing things we’re not sure make any difference, but we don’t know what else to do. We’re just overwhelmed.

In these overwhelming times of life, we need to remember that there are resources beyond what we can muster. Our God is able to master any obstacle in our lives and give us success.

There’s a story about a teacher who was doing in-home sub work for kids who were out of school for an extended time. One day she was sent to the hospital to see an elementary-age boy. His teacher said they were studying irregular verbs and dangling participles, and she didn’t want him to fall behind.

So the tutor went to the hospital, and she was horrified to find that her student was in the critical care unit. He had been in an accident and was burned so badly he could barely talk. The teacher tried her best to work

with him, but when she left, she honestly didn't know if he had understood anything she said.

When she returned the next day, the nurse was all smiles. She said, "You worked a miracle yesterday! We have been so worried about that little boy. He was so depressed and unresponsive. He had given up. He was just lying there, waiting to die. But after you came, his attitude changed. He is talking. He is working with us. He is fighting to live and responding to treatment. Now we think he's really going to make it!"

The teacher didn't know that she had done anything, but later on the boy explained the realization that came to him right after the teacher's first visit: "They told me I would live, but I didn't believe them. I thought they were just saying that. But when the teacher came, it made all the difference. I realized they wouldn't send a teacher to work on verbs and participles with a dying boy!"⁶

The disciples may have worried that this whole Jesus thing was going down the tubes, but why would God show up on the mountain and bring Moses and Elijah if they weren't all bound for glory? The Transfiguration confirmed that Jesus could be trusted and followed.

The Transfiguration also **empowers** Jesus and the disciples for the journey. The way forward was not going to be easy. They were going to Jerusalem, where Jesus would be arrested, condemned, beaten, and crucified. How could they endure that? How could they persevere?

They could remember. They had been to the mountaintop. They had heard the Voice. They had seen the glory. They could withstand the trials because they knew where they were headed.

One of the most empowered women I ever heard of was named Florence Foster Jenkins. Meryl Streep starred in a movie about her life a couple of years ago. She died in 1944. She was a wealthy New York socialite, originally from Pennsylvania. Florence Foster Jenkins loved music and loved to sing, and she felt called to share her talent with the world. Unfortunately, she was not very good. In fact, she was comically bad. She could hardly carry a tune or follow a beat. But she was so genuine and so wonderfully eccentric that she had a tremendous following in New York City in the 1930's. She gave only one concert a year, at the Ritz-Carlton

hotel, and her tickets were the most sought-after entertainment in the city. She would struggle through the standard operatic repertoire and sing songs that were written especially for her by her faithful accompanist. She had designer dresses made for her occasions, including one that had fully feathered angel wings protruding from the back.

Mrs. Jenkins' final concert was her debut at Carnegie Hall. At the age of 76, she sang her favorites to a crowd that had sold out weeks in advance. A month later she died, having written her own epitaph: "Some people say I cannot sing, but no one can say I did not sing."⁷

We all have reasons to keep our mouths shut—we're depressed or sad or sick or hurt or angry. We're in the midst of trouble, or we see trouble coming down the road. But we know how this all ends. We have seen the glory. We have heard the Voice say "This is my Son." We have beheld the power of the transfigured Christ. Some may say we cannot or do not sing very well, but never let it be said that we did not sing the song of faith!

We all come to the Table today out of our own context. Let this holy meal confirm you in your faith. Let this bread and juice empower you for service. Let this Communion be your glimpse of glory today.

¹ Luke 9:20.

² Luke 9:23-24.

³ Luke 9:35.

⁴ Luke 3:22.

⁵ Fanny Crosby, "Blessed Assurance," *United Methodist Hymnal*, #369.

⁶ James Moore, *Lord, I've Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses* (Dimensions for Living, 1998).

⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateways*, unpublished manuscript, p. 111. "Florence Foster Jenkins," starring Meryl Streep, Qwerty Films, BBC films, 2016.