

Transfiguration C
Church of the Good Shepherd
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“Glory Days”

Years ago, back when I had cable, I happened upon an episode of the TV show, “What Not To Wear.” If you’re not familiar with the show, the premise was you take a “fashion-challenged” woman who’s been nominated for a makeover, and the stylist hosts would help them to choose clothes, haircut and makeup that flatter their looks. Described that way, you might dismiss it, as I did, as a vapid and utterly shallow show. And I wouldn’t normally have watched it. But I was surprised to find that there was actually more to this show than a wardrobe upgrade.

For, as the hosts were going through the woman’s closet, they asked about her clothes, mostly jeans and sweatshirts, and why she liked them. She admitted that she’s been wearing these clothes since college, now ten years past. She went on to explain that college was the best years in her life and her life since then has been rather disappointing. It was apparent then, to the hosts and to me, that this woman’s problem wasn’t so much a lack of fashion sense as much as her clinging to her college days. By wearing the same clothes she wore when she was a student, she was trying to “stay in college,” to cling to who she was then. So, before the hosts worked with her on new clothes, they had to work with her on her self-image, providing her what I’d call pastoral counseling, helping her to get her “unstuck” in her growth as a person.

Fact is, though, this woman’s “clothing clinginess,” her sartorial “stuckness,” is just a particularly vivid example of a tendency many of us give into. Many of us look back at a time in our life—our high school days or college years, our first romance or the roadtrip we took with friends when we were young—as being best time in our life, our “glory days.” We wish we could just go back and relive it or, better, freeze the moment, “save time in a bottle” as the old Jim Croce song has it, so we could enjoy it forever.

We are tempted to do the same thing with our faith. If you’ve ever had a “mountaintop experience” at a summer camp, or on a church retreat, or even in Sunday worship, when God made himself known in a new and powerful way, you know how easy it is to want to cling to it, to the vision you received or emotions you felt, and to treat it as the foundation of your faith, refusing to let it go, to move on from it. I’ve known people who, ten, twenty, in one case forty years after they were “born again”, were still talking about it, still trying to recover the immediacy, intimacy, awesomeness of that original encounter with God.

My point in bringing this up is to say that we can understand why Simon Peter responded the way he did in today’s lesson. He’s startled awake by a beatific vision, a vision of Jesus, Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop shining with the uncreated light of divinity. “Master,” he blurts out, “it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Peter’s suggestion is understandable, for as far as divine epiphanies go, this one is right up there with the best of them—*three* of God’s messengers together in one place, in a scene just radiating with God’s glory. If you were looking for a spiritual experience, a supernatural

encounter, you've found it, you've arrived, so there's no need to go any further. Just set up camp here on the mountain and bask in the glow of the spiritual high. It makes sense. Most of us, I imagine, would do the same.

But as Peter and the other disciples quickly discover, God has other ideas, other plans. Not a moment after they are started by this vision, a voice booms out of the cloud, God's voice: "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" And just like that, the floodlights cut off, the smoke machine stops, and they see normal-looking Jesus standing alone. And he tells them it's time to go, to head back down the mountain, back to the real world, back to frontlines, back to the hard work of ministry.

Peter had wanted to memorialize, to canonize the experience of the Transfiguration, to keep Jesus shiny, beautiful, and safe up on a mountain, but God says no, they have to move on. The lesson we take from this is that we are not to make our faith, our experience of God, even the miraculous events we've seen, into a memorial, a monument. Whatever "mountain top experiences" we've had, they are not the end, the goal. They are a rest stop, a retreat, a step on the way, an occasion that God uses to refresh us, recharge us and remind us of our mission, of the larger vision.

Indeed, we can put out of our mind the idea that will ever truly "arrive," not in this life. We will never have achieved the fullness of perfection, of happiness, of joy. As the German Reformer Martin Luther wrote, "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

Now there are two implications we might draw from this statement. On the one hand, it means that being a Christian is not, first of all, about living a morally unblemished life, or following all of the dictates of God. We don't have to be perfect in order to be a Christian. A Christian, at least here on the Mount of Transfiguration, is precisely someone who listens to Jesus. Someone who listens to him, who seeks to hear his words and understand them.

Nor should we, on the flipside, think that just because we are Christian, just because we have the Scriptures and Sacraments, just because we've had amazing experiences of God, that we are complete, we're secure, we've arrived. We've got Jesus, so we're good. That was the mistake Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees, made. They thought that because they had the Law, just because they "followed the rules," that was enough, as if that is all there is to religion. And a lot of people think about Christianity that way, too, as a matter of morality, of following rules.

A colleague of mine, a retired college chaplain, is forever trying to disabuse people of that idea. He was at the gym recently when a guy there found out he was a pastor. He immediately defended himself: "I don't go to church, but I do try to do right and to live a good life, to help people when I can, and isn't that after all, what the Christian faith is mostly about?" My colleague, being a nice Methodist, held his tongue. But he confessed later that, had he not been at the gym, in shorts and a T-shirt, had the guy been a member of his congregation, had he really been committed to this man's intellectual growth and development, he would have answered the

guy's easy religion. Maybe something snarky, like, "Wow. That's deep! Did you think that up yourself or did you read it somewhere? Give me a pen. I want to write that down and use it in a sermon." But he didn't say that. He's too nice a guy. Nor did he say what he really wanted to say, which was, "You poor, simple, secular soul, that is not what Christianity is all about. The Christian faith is about more, so much more than your little deeds, even your very good little deeds. It's about worship, awe, mystery, ecstasy!"

My colleague is right. But even his explanation can be misleading. Mountaintop experiences, feelings of awe and ecstasy as he says, aren't the point either, not in themselves. They are not what we live for, what we are aiming at. If God should grace us with such an experience, it is to give us a taste, a sample of what is to come, or, better, a pointer, a sign on the way, leading us to our true destiny. To get hung up on them, though, is like admiring a sign but not following the sign's instructions. We might admire the size or color or design of a sign, but if we fail to register that we are going the wrong way or have parked in a no parking zone or entered the wrong bathroom, then we are going to be in trouble.

That's why Peter's suggestion about the tents is so misguided. He wants to memorialize the encounter with God, but not do what God says. He wants to hold on to the moment rather than let it shape his life.

That is not what the Transfiguration is for. For the Transfiguration is not just something the disciples witness, it is something they are drawn into. Just as Jesus' face was changed, so will they be changed. For to see Christ truly is to become like him. Indeed, for all that the Transfiguration says about who Jesus is, his divinity, it is not about mere perception, about understanding Christ more fully. It is about being conformed to him, about seeing God and being seen by God and in that seeing, being changed. As Paul says in our first lesson, "we, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed from glory to glory" (2 Cor 3:18).

Transfiguration then is not merely an event upon the mountaintop; it is the pattern of Christian life—being changed, being transformed, becoming more like Jesus, more like God. And the church is called to be not a museum of past revelations, nor a fortress of rigid tradition, nor a spiritual marketplace offering religious goods. Rather, the church is to be the place of transfiguration, a place where Christ is seen, where God is encountered, where we are drawn into the ongoing, unfolding glory of God.

To be sure, this can be scary, frightening, if you like the way things are, if you are okay with the way you are. But what Jesus' Transfiguration means is that there's always something more, something better, more glorious to be revealed, no matter what stage of life we are in. We are called "further up and further in," as CS Lewis says at the end of his *Chronicles of Narnia*.

There's one more detail worth noting about this story. Luke says that, before they disappeared, Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his "departure." We assume this refers to his death. But the word Luke uses is not simply departure but "exodus," the same word given for the second book of the Bible, which tells the story of ancient Israel's "departure" from slavery in

Egypt. By using this word for Jesus' departure, Moses and Elijah are anticipating "a new exodus," the redemption of humanity not from slavery, but from slavery to sin.

That said, the first exodus, as important as it was, was not the end of the story for the Jews. They left Egypt but their destination, their destiny was the Promised Land. In the same way, the second, greater "exodus" that Jesus effected on the cross isn't the end, for him or for us. It opens the door, leading the way to our destiny—which is not just redemption, but eternal life with God.

This is important for us to remember as we begin the season of Lent this week, and the walk to the cross. Just as we are not to see the Transfiguration as the end, nor should we fear that Christ's suffering and death are the end either. The cross too is a stop on the way, on the way to God. And we have been prepared for this, for the tragedy, by the Transfiguration. We know what the Passion is all about. We know the glory that is hidden in his crucifixion, because we have seen it revealed in the Transfiguration.

And the promise is that, by following Jesus, watching him, seeing God revealed on both the Mount of the Transfiguration and on the hill of Calvary, and not just seeing him, but listening to him as he undergoes his final days, we will find ourselves becoming not just witnesses, but participants, drawn up into the action and changed by it. And in the process, we will find that our "glory days" will no longer be confined to the past, but will be a fitting description of the life we will have with God. Thanks be to God!