



Jesus: Between the Uncanny and Marvelous  
Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 99, Matthew 17:1-9  
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Transfiguration of the Lord

It was around college that I looked more deeply at my beliefs and wondered how they intertwine with my faith. And while doing this, unexpectedly, a tragedy hit my family and I put my curiosity and faith on hold. I decided to study abroad in France, leaving my faith behind. After a few months, I felt a nudge at my heart. I had already made plans to move to Nkhoma, Malawi for several months and I thought, well let's make this a spiritual journey and see where I end up. One afternoon, I heard some folks were planning to hike Nkhoma Mountain, this high rigid peak you see from every angle in Nkhoma. Their plan was to stay overnight halfway at a cottage and then hike early in the morning for the sunrise. I thought, yes! This is it. I will connect with nature and creation. I will connect with God again. I will make this part of my spiritual journey. But it was far from it. We made it halfway up the mountain and while we were eating dinner, a fairly, large man wandered up, who had obviously indulged himself with some psychedelic imposing natural plant. He wandered into the living space, said a few words, that were quite humorous and then he completely passed out on the couch. We tried moving him and waking him up, but he would not budge. So, we left him there and we slept on the front porch staring up at the stars. I was a bit nervous; we didn't know if he would wake up and wander out while we were sleeping. And then, while we were nodding off, we heard rustling in the bushes and a whooping noise. Hyenas are nocturnal. So far, I had not felt God. No spiritual journey here. No revelation yet. All I felt was fear and lots of questions of why did I decide to go on this hike? We woke around 4 am, put on our headlamps and looked for the trail heading up the mountain. As we hiked, we continued to hear the

whooping noise and we knew the hyenas were close, but they are very good at hiding. I fell and nastily scrapped up my knees. One man turned his ankle. Another woman asked that we come back for her. Several headlamps gave out and someone left their water back at the hut. So far, this mountaintop experience was not as I had hoped but continued forward. When we finally made it to the top, we saw a gorgeous, blinding sunrise. I have photos. But I was so exhausted and overwhelmed by the hike, it wasn't a mountaintop experience at all. It was nothing like Peter, James, and John's experience.

Six days before their mountaintop experience, Jesus reveals to his disciples that his death is coming. Peter, as Peter does, physically takes hold of Jesus and blurts out, "God forbid, Lord. This won't happen to you." Jesus reminds him that he is God and Peter is thinking like a human. It's going to happen, Peter. I am going to die. And so, six days later, Jesus takes his closest disciples up to a mountaintop, which already shows that something special is about to happen since Jesus often prayed on his own when he climbed mountains. While up there, Jesus changes in appearance and a bright light shines through his face while two dead men join him on either side—Elijah, representing the prophets, and Moses, the laws. Peter again, in all his Peter-ness or human-ness speaks, without thinking, and blurts out, "I will make three shrines for each of you!" While Peter is talking, somehow a large, bright cloud rolls in, interrupts Peter and overshadows the group. A voice from the cloud, that I'm sure would raise the hair on the back of our necks, says, "This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him! The disciples fall to the ground, mirroring the religious culture they know so well. And then, poof, as quickly

as this weird encounter came, the bright cloud, Elijah, Moses and the shining light are gone.

I think imagine Jesus kneeling down, touching their backs, like a mother rubbing the back of their crying child, and then extending his hand to help his beloved disciples up off the ground. I imagine this touch reassures the disciples of their safety and God's gentle presence. A simple human touch of genuine love discards all fear and worry. For John Calvin, this simple human touch of genuine love, well, it's the great genius of God.<sup>1</sup> God, who is the intricate creator of all things great and small, all things diverse and beautiful; God, who is somewhere between the uncanny and the marvelous; God, who is more powerful than our minds know, but who is loving enough to know our minds; God, who we belong to, well, that God thinks outside the box of power as we know it and brilliantly mirrors our shape to walk among us, reach out, and gently touch our shoulders to that our fears are calmed and our faith is nourished. Jesus' hand on the disciple's shoulder is God's own touch. The disciples saw, in a very short moment, the vastness of God—a booming voice from the cloud, a blinding beacon of light that was then tucked away inside the body of Christ, and a gentle touch on the shoulder letting them know that God is with them no matter what, there's no need to be afraid.

William Sloane Coffin writes about this transfiguration, saying, “we are not saying that God is confined to Christ, only that God is more essentially defined by Christ. So when we talk of the divinity of Jesus, it is well to recall that what is important is not that Christ is God-like but rather that God is Christ-like.<sup>2</sup> And I would add in my own words, that God chose to be Christ-like, that is to say, God put away the fireworks and gave us Jesus, wrapped in flesh and love, extending God's hands to a world desperately in need of his gentle touch.

And so I go back to my mountaintop. Years later and with spiritual maturity under my belt, I now realize God was in the midst of the community hiking that mountain. Transfiguration reveals the incarnation. What I mean by that is on our 4 am hike, God, Jesus was in every hand and muscle extended to pull the other up onto a boulder. God, Jesus was in the hand and kind words that lifted each of us out of a fall.

God, Jesus was in the bread we broke at dinner. God, Jesus was in the sighs of relief and in the tense hugs as we reached the top. God, Jesus was in the laughter we shared days later as we realized how crazy we were to hike in the dark. And so, on this Transfiguration Sunday, we might be tempted to lean towards his grand, glorious, perfect, unexplainable mountaintop experience where God dazzles through Christ. And while it's true, God dazzles through Christ in ways we can hardly understand, Jesus also reveals God's organic nature by extending a comforting touch and a helping hand. God showed that God can show up in a cloud and in a bright light, but God meets us where we're at as humans. God comes to us with a kind touch and a hand extended so that we can be pulled up off the ground.

After this transfiguration moment, that is kept secret among the group, God, Jesus heads back down the mountain slowly walking towards his death that has now been revealed to his disciples. And as he walks, he extends his hands to transfigure others—to heal the sick, empower the weak, scorn the powerful, he breaks bread, blesses the children, welcomes the outcast and embraces the stranger. He knows his end is coming, but that does not stop him and it should not stop us either, as we look towards Lent. In fact, we should embrace it as our own spiritual practice. William Sloane Coffin called upon Christians to extend a hand. He wrote, “...people are going to have to do more than just that thing they know how to do; they are going to have to extend themselves. Most of us live in this city, a city of every conceivable form of brutality, where women are beaten by men who once were children beaten by their fathers and mothers; a city demoralized by idleness, where to most people love appears as another form of luxury. Well, for this potentially glorious city to be humanized, people are going to have to extend themselves.”<sup>3</sup> He continues, “Most of us, likewise, are citizens of this country; that is to say, people who in regard to the arms race feel that somehow, somewhere, a fail-safe mechanism will save us, people who in regard to domestic politics consider it more important for entrepreneurs to enjoy the fruits of their initiatives than that the widows and orphans be fed. To make our beloved, but hardhearted country more tenderhearted, people are going to

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Wilson, “Matthew 17:1-9,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*, Ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 455.

<sup>2</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 134.

<sup>3</sup> Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin*, 136.

have to extend themselves.”<sup>4</sup> William Sloane Coffin asks, and who are the people to do God’s work? “Christians, people like you and me, who can once again, across the centuries, hear and heed the voice from the cloud saying, ‘this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!’”<sup>5</sup>

And we have the capabilities to listen and extend ourselves right here at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. We live in a city where people experiencing the harshness of homelessness are fearful of city shelters because of the abuse and the systems set in place that strip them of dignity. I hear it all the time. And MAPC is among a group of faith-based churches and synagogues who are motivated to provide a safe, healthy and welcoming alternative space for 12 men to lay their heads at night. And we can only sleep 12 men if people are willing to extend their hands in a gentle welcome and see God transfiguring the relationships built while volunteering. It’s a ministry when we extend our hands, our hearts are transfigured, and our guest’s lives have a second chance in our society. It’s as much for our guests as it is for our hearts. Many of you who volunteer know this.

And so today, this week, where we stand on the mountaintop, we can survey the 40 days of lent ahead, take a deep breath—and remember that the journey through ashes, wilderness, and sorrow is never for its own sake. It’s for the sake of transfiguration. It’s for the sake of a radiant new life and a dazzling new world where all are gathered around the Table in the Kingdom of Heaven. It’s for the sake of the world where when we extend ourselves, we see God in the face of other and hearts, souls, and relationships begin to transfigure into the incarnate. May we extend ourselves, so this world is a gentler place to live. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*