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“Blessed Befuddlement”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Transfiguration of the Lord

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Ex. 34:29–35; 2 Cor. 4:6–7; Lk. 9:28–36

Gracious God, we gather here this morning, seeking a vision of what our lives are all about, what it means to live as those created in your image as those who seek to follow Christ. Many days, we see through a mirror dimly, we long to see face to face. Come, open our eyes, open our hearts that we may see and follow more faithfully Christ our Lord. Amen.

Growing up as a Presbyterian, the story of the transfiguration was not high on my list of Bible stories: the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan—I could go on and on about the best-known Bible stories, but the transfiguration was not there. Even when I got to college and seminary, it was not in the top ten.

This changed for me a number of years ago when I was accompanying Carlisle on a trip to Russia. She was leading the trip with Bruce Rigdon, who is a Presbyterian minister and who taught church history at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. When we gathered for orientation to go to this country that we had been told a lot of things about; it had been called the Evil Empire, we were not sure what to expect. Bruce began our orientation by telling us about an experience he had had while he was a graduate student at Yale University. He got his Ph.D. there, studying Church history with Roland Bainton. Many of you will know Roland Bainton as the author of *Here I Stand*, the definitive biography of Martin Luther.

Roland Bainton was a great scholar and teacher. Bruce Rigdon was the research assistant for Dr. Bainton. He spent a lot of his time in the Sterling Library. One day, he was researching a book on Coptic monks. Some of you may know that the monastic movement began in Egypt, and Coptic monks were a very interesting subject to church historians. On this particular day, he came upon a commentary written by a sixth-century Coptic monk on the transfiguration story.

He said, “I was amazed by this commentary from the sixth century.” The writer said the transfiguration story is a miracle story. There is the miracle of Jesus being transfigured, becoming radiant, as the story says, but that’s not all. What was the other part of the miracle?

We just read it: three of Jesus’ disciples, Peter, James, and John, were befuddled, mystified, and speechless because something happened to them that they could not understand or explain.

That has been somewhat of my early reticence to put this story high on my list of biblical stories because it seems unusual, strange, out-of-place in our world, so unlikely, so mysterious that afterwards, they could not speak about it. Jesus took the three of them up a mountain to pray. If you go up to a mountain to pray in the Bible, that’s a signal that something important is about to happen. Think of Mt. Sinai where God met Moses, the Mount of Olives, or the Sermon on the Mount.

The way they remembered it later, when they finally got around to talking about it, was that Jesus’ clothes, his face, and his whole persona seemed to shine. Moses and Elijah were there, and they talked about how his life would end. The disciples had fallen asleep, but they were awakened in the middle of this strange experience. And then there was Peter’s response. You can always count on Peter to say something. It may be wrong; it usually is wrong. It seems that Peter started chattering. Maybe you’ve done this before; when you get anxious about something, you just start talking. He says, in essence, “Wow! This is really great! It’s so good that we are here to see this! Think about it—what if we had missed it? But we didn’t! We’re here together and it’s so good! Let’s build three dwellings. Let’s construct these sanctuaries here to preserve the moment. Then we could come back

every year and have an anniversary. Isn't this great?" Luke, the Gospel writer, is a little embarrassed by Peter's chattering, and he apologizes for him: "He doesn't know what he is saying."

And while Peter is going on and on about the building project, a cloud descends—another biblical signal that God is about to do or say something. Now they're terrified, and the voice says, "Be quiet. Stop talking. Listen. Listen to him. He is my son. My beloved."

That's the day they started to get it. That's the second miracle that the Coptic monk wrote about. It was not only the transfiguration of Jesus, but the transfiguration of the three disciples. Even though they couldn't explain it, they learned to stop talking and listen to Jesus. That was a miracle, as great a miracle as the transfiguration of Jesus was the transfiguration of these sleepy guys who often didn't get it. Their eyes were opened, and they saw Jesus as he really was for the first time.

You've had experiences where it was hard to talk about it, hard to put it in words, and if you did, you're not sure if people would understand, so why bother? Just keep it to yourself. What they were trying to understand was God, and how God is present among us. And God can never be adequately gripped, grabbed, or seized by you and me. What if we are here in worship this morning, not so much to "get" God, but rather to expose ourselves to the possibility that during this service of worship, God might "get" us? God might be revealed to us?

Jesus takes his disciples up a mountain on a higher level. There, Jesus does not teach or explain anything to them. He befuddles them. He mystifies them. He is transfigured before them.

"Okay, preacher, what does this story really mean?" you ask. "How can we use it in our daily lives? How are we to make sense of this strange story? What is the bottom line?"

What if this strange story of Jesus being transfigured on the mountaintop is a way to invite us to see Jesus? Often, we ask the question, “Who is Jesus?” And often, the answers we give, as Albert Schweitzer so carefully said in his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, is that Jesus looks and acts and thinks a lot like us. What if this episode is not meant to explain Jesus but rather to point to Jesus? What if this is not like the way to solve the problem or answer the question of who Jesus is? What if this is more like a picture you are to look at and be encountered by rather than a problem to be solved?

Nobody I know looks at a great work of art, stands there before the canvas, and then exclaims, "I've got it! I've got it!"

Rather, if it's a truly great work of art, sometimes you walk away muttering, "Wow. It really got me."

It's hard for us to be “gotten” because, as one person has put it, “we live in the darkness, and it's hard for us to see the light.”

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates John 1:5 as “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” However, the Authorized King James Version of the Bible translates that same verse as “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.” Darkness is unable to comprehend the light. What if the darkness surrounds us that we can't figure Jesus out because we cannot see the light that shines into the darkness? We cannot comprehend God coming into the world as a crucified savior. What if we were to see that? What if it were to grasp us?

Wow! Maybe we could be transfigured.

The Coptic Church has a phrase for what happens when you see God. When you see God in Jesus Christ, you become aware that Jesus is God enfleshed for our salvation. I love that phrase: enfleshed for our salvation. Or as Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, says, “In Jesus, God hits the streets.” He becomes one of us for our salvation.

This Lenten journey we are about to enter is about God coming to live among us, to transform us, to transfigure us, to shape our lives. That is the purpose and the challenge and the mission that we are about. What would happen if we began to see the world and ourselves as Jesus saw it, in a new light? What if we were to see Jesus in a different light as the humble, suffering servant who came to save us? What if we listened to his words, not calling the poor, the hungry, “stray animals” as one politician did recently, but what if we heard “Blessed are the poor” as a call to serve those in need as children of God? Instead of supporting more instruments of war, what if we heard “Love your enemies” as incentive to reach across walls that separate us from other mountaintops? What if we listen to Jesus’ challenge to forgive as we have been forgiven?

Several years ago, we had a music director here at the church, and in addition to working with our young people, she had a choir of challenged young people. It was a very moving experience to hear them sing. She would carry them from place to place. They wore red coats. She told of the story one time when they went to Wendy’s for lunch after one of their performances. A man walked in and saw these four or five tables of challenged young people in their red coats. The guy said, “I’m not going to eat here. If I’d want to eat around these kind of people, I would have gone to some hospital or some institution.” And he stomped out of the Wendy’s.

Suzanne Schoffner was irritated and angry. She started to get up and follow the man out of the Wendy’s to give him a piece of her mind. But one of the kids said, “No, Suzanne. Let him go. He’s not a bad man. He just hadn’t seen Jesus yet.”

He just hadn’t seen Jesus yet. When you see Jesus, you look at people, yourself, the world differently. What if this Lenten season, we made it our goal to be transformed by the presence of Christ?

For all the mystery on the mountaintop, there is nothing more mysterious than divine, holy love taking root in this city, in this congregation, in our lives. That one suffered and died for us, becoming the one whom we seek to follow. Albert

Schweitzer suggested that you learn who he is by following him. There's no greater mystery than that somehow, the death of Jesus at the hands of the authorities was not just a tragedy or injustice. It was a gesture of love that has the power to transform our lives. And gestures of love made present and real among us still have the power to change us.

That, my friends, is what the Lenten journey is about, with the prayer that God will open our eyes; that the same thing that happened to those three disciples will happen to us; that we will see more clearly God among us, God in our world, and follow where God leads. My prayer for me and for you is that we will have the "Blessed Befuddlement" of seeing Jesus and following him where he leads during this Lenten season.

Amen.