

## ***The Transfiguration of Our Lord [Year C]***

Exodus 34:28-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2

**LUKE 9:28-36 [37-43a]**

*A Sermon for Every Sunday*

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Not too long ago I received a summons for jury duty, and out of the 50-60 potential jurors that were summoned with me, I ended up being one of seven chosen for a civil case that lasted three days. It was a very new experience for me as I had not only never received a summons before, but neither had I ever been inside a courtroom or seen a judge in his or her robe. They actually wear robes!!

As a member of this special jury, each day we had to report to a certain floor on the parking deck of the county office buildings and be escorted by a bailiff down several long halls, through some doors that had security key entry into our jury room and then, finally, into the courtroom to hear the case. It was altogether kind of a sacred experience, there in the inner sanctum of the American justice system. They gave us a lot of instructions, but I found I was more prepared for what was going on because I had seen so many “Matlock” and “Law and Order” episodes growing up. Even though we were treated almost like royalty, we were very sequestered. We had to leave our smartphones and computers in the parking deck. That made me feel like I was living in a bubble.

For three days we listened quietly as the detailed testimonies poured forth from the witnesses. There was a lot to take in and digest, but—here’s the kicker—we weren’t allowed to discuss it with anyone. We weren’t allowed to go home and share things with our spouse or friends, and we weren’t even allowed to discuss it with each other. We just had to take it in, experience it ourselves. We were left to create our own narrative and meaning in our mind based on what we were hearing and keep it to ourselves. Once it was over, I was permitted to speak about it, but I’m not sure I can every explain what I saw and heard.

In many ways, that experience is kind of like Jesus’ transfiguration. Lots of disciples are called, but only three are summoned and selected for this honored journey where they’re allowed to witness a very special event involving Jesus. They have this unique experience with the truth of Jesus where they’ve never seen him in such a white robe. They are moved, even terrified at one point. When it’s all over, they don’t talk about it. They keep it to themselves, and so what they really encounter there on the mountain and what it all means is still somewhat of a mystery to anyone who wasn’t there. We never get to hear what Peter, James, and John think about their experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, how exactly it changed them, or what they do with it.

To some degree, isn’t that true of all of our experiences with God’s holiness, whether we glimpse it in worship, or in some meaningful and moving service event, or perhaps during a week at summer camp or even in private prayer? Perhaps you’ve attended a spiritual retreat at some point and you’ve come back from that event with the sense you have felt and seen something about glory of God or the community of Jesus that you weren’t quite be able to communicate to people who weren’t there also.

When Moses comes down Mount Sinai after his conference with God his face is shining and he puts this veil over it. That veil kind of obscures him from everyone around him who didn’t go up on the mountain. It makes him a bit mysterious, I bet—a bit removed from them.

That’s the thing, right, about experiences with God’s glory, or, as some people might call them, “God moments”? When I have them I find it is wonderful and exhilarating for me, but it

almost puts a veil over me face to everyone else, and if those people weren't there, or if they haven't experienced something comparable, it can become alienating.

The danger is this, of course, especially after having several of them, is that we start thinking that these powerful experiences of God's glory is all that faith is supposed to entail. We can fall into the trap that Peter apparently does when he asks to build the dwellings that day on the mountain—that sustaining that mystery and mystique is the point of Christian faith. It's like we want to figure out a way to wear this veil all the time, only wanting to lift it when we're in those places that we connect with God.

One of the earliest controversies that arose in the church was a belief system called Gnosticism. Gnosticism essentially taught that God could only be met in the mountaintop experiences, that you had to be one of the select few who could encounter God's glory. In gnostic belief, that veil was really important, in other words. It helped you maintain that mystique and that special knowledge about God. I'm afraid we can even start to think of worship this way, if we're not careful. We can believe that if we're not feeling something each Sunday, or if we're not learning something powerful and new, then worship has become pointless. This is a form of modern-day Gnosticism and we still have to fight against it. We still need to fight against that understanding of faith because any message of Jesus that says God is for select people is not the gospel. Any form of Christianity that calls us to leave the world is opposite to what Jesus is about.

When Jesus is transfigured and his glory is revealed, he is talking about his departure in Jerusalem. The actual word for "departure" here is exodus. Jesus is meeting with the two greatest figures of his people's faith and history, the two people who got closest to God in their time—Moses and Elijah—and what Jesus is talking about is the cross. That is, he is speaking about how his departure through death will be the point at which God's people are led to freedom—freedom from their slavery to sin, freedom from selfishness, freedom from the idea that God has to be climbed to. Jesus' exodus is going to show that everyone in any circumstance is already present with God. Jesus' death is going to reveal that God climbs down into every possible place we might find ourselves in. That's not secret knowledge. There is no special prayer you need to say, there is no privileged background you have to have, there is no degree or experience you need to testify to to receive that. God has given himself to you as you are, no matter how uninformed and excluded you feel.

And as if to prove what he means, the first thing that happens when Jesus and the special three come down the mountain is that he encounters a hurting person. It's a really unpleasant circumstance. There's this boy overcome with some sort of evil spirit. His father is distraught and terrified. Now, I have to believe that if Jesus had been transfigured to show that God is only going to reveal himself to the select few, I think Jesus probably would have walked on by. If Jesus had been transfigured in the blazing white robe and the voice in the cloud had said "This is my Son, my Chosen" in order to communicate that faith is only about super transcendent moments on the mountains, then Jesus probably would have said "Dude. Sorry. I've got other important mountains to climb." It's difficult to say exactly what Jesus might have done in this situation if God were only concerned about keeping himself veiled. But that's not who God is. Jesus stops right in the middle of this messy situation and responds compassionately to what he finds. He rebukes the boy's unclean spirit and heals him and gives him back to his father. God comes to us in all our distorted realities, throwing back his own veil of mystery in the love of his Son Jesus.

I recently ran across a great article by a Mennonite pastor out in Alberta, Canada. He lives just several miles away from some of the most breathtakingly beautiful mountain ranges in the world. His name is Ryan Dueck and he admits that those mountains are often his sanctuary, that the closeness to God he feels there is profound and healing. He admits that he has often in his life skipped church on Sunday in order to be there. But Dueck says he also has come to realize that Jesus calls him back down from the mountains to be with people. He says in his article, "The God of creation can inspire me, but creation cannot demand that I die to myself and become ever more alive and attentive to all the things that are ugly and easily ignored in the world."<sup>1</sup>

Said another way, mountaintop experiences, wherever they are and however they come, often end up giving us a veil, and Jesus came to remove that veil. Jesus removes the veil so we can see ourselves in each other's suffering. Jesus removes the veil so we can understand that we are created to be in community with one another and Jesus came to die on the cross to show us how to do that and make that possible, as messy as it can be sometimes.

One day, though, it will be clear that Jesus' love and power to heal has embraced the whole world. One day it will be fully unveiled that all who are seeking freedom from their brokenness have found it in Jesus the Christ. One great day on the other side of this valley of tears it will be clear as a bright new day that God has claimed us and healed us all. I think that's why Jesus selects Peter and James and John. What happens on the mount of transfiguration is not a trial or a hearing or a piece of evidence but a view, if you will, of God's final verdict. It's a brief, hopeful view of that day when all is said and done...and everything will give way except for Jesus, everything will fade like mist except for the One who offers his life for us. We will have a robe, too, and his light will be reflected in us, from glory into glory.

And on that day we will talk about it and laugh about it and wonder about it out loud. All. Day. Long.

Thanks be to God!

*The Reverend Phillip W. Martin, Jr.*

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Dueck, "Nature is My Sanctuary, but Jesus Keeps Dragging Me Back to Church," in *The Christian Century*, October 26, 2018. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/cblogs-network/nature-my-sanctuary-jesus-keeps-dragging-me-back-church>