

TRANSFIGURED: CHANGE IS GONNA COME

[Augsburg University Chapel, February 16, 2021]

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one^[a] on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^[b] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved;^[c] listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

The Coming of Elijah

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Perhaps the most daunting thing I have experienced during these past 11 months – these pandemic times – is a lack of control. Every time I believed I knew what to do, the landscape changed, new information emerged, something I was certain would work turned out to be an illusion. The virus eluded me; businesses and organizations I care about were buffeted; the city I love was wracked by violence and fear. How about you? Control was not to be had – where are we to turn to make sense of what is happening in our daily lives?

In this time just before we enter the 40 days of Lent, we read this mystical story from Mark’s gospel about the transfiguration of Jesus. Transfiguration – a fancy word that means to be lifted up, made more beautiful, more luminous, to be transformed. We come upon this scene where Peter, James and John – three of Jesus’s most faithful disciples – witness Jesus, along with Elijah and Moses – giants of the faith – in conversation as Jesus is transfigured, placed in the pantheon of God’s beloved.

And they are frightened – terrified, Mark tells us – and what do they want to do but to take control, to build monuments to what they have seen, to make sense of this extraordinary moment. But there would be no control, no dwellings to build, no sense to be made, as a voice from on high proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!”

I am struck by how this story frames the days to come. Transfigured, Jesus turns his eyes to Jerusalem, and in the journey that follows – the journey we begin again tomorrow on Ash Wednesday – instead of the celebration of one transfigured, we watch as Jesus humbles himself again and again, in service to others, in accepting his fate, in death on a cross – until that brilliant Easter morning when God reconciles all of creation to God’s self.

And along the way, we see the disciples continuing to seek control – cutting off the ear of a centurion in the garden, betraying Jesus to the authorities, denying Jesus to fellow citizens,

failing to see that God's plan for Jesus and for all of creation is the only way to make sense of what is happening; the only way, the only truth, the only life.

The theologian Howard Thurman, who was a faculty member and the dean of the chapel at Boston University, tells this compelling story in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* – purportedly a book that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. carried with him throughout his journeys. He recounts how his mother awakened him one night when he was young to step outside and watch Halley's Comet blaze across the sky. As he watched in wonder, he asked his mother, "what will happen if that comet falls from the sky?" And after a few moments of silence, his mother replied, "Nothing will happen to us, Howard; God will take care of us."

Thurman comments on this moment: "O simplehearted mother of mine, in one glorious moment you put your heart on the ultimate affirmation of the human spirit! Many things have I seen since that night. Times with number I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel; but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother's glowing words has come back again and again, beating out its rhythmic chant in my own spirit. Here are the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield." In other words, here is the faith – as has become cliché – to let go and to let God.

To strive, to achieve, and not to yield – there is the call that Thurman found in his mother's profound faith that so inspired others like Dr. King to give up human longing for control and to trust that God is in the midst of our history and our lives, showing us – if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear – what it is that God intends for God's creation and what people of faith are called to be and do in response.

I have been reflecting on this remarkable story and its lessons for our lives as I think back on the final days of my mother's life. She was a remarkable woman who had been fighting cancer for many years and now was in a hospice waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family – six kids, with spouses, and lots of grandchildren – were with her constantly, holding on for dear life, seeking control, wanting to have more time with her. Finally, a good nurse said to us, it is time for you to leave, to let go, and so we did, reluctantly, and mom passed into God's arms shortly thereafter.

This experience strikes me as instructive for all of us as we learn to "keep vigil" with and for each other in our journeys of faith. I wonder what we might all learn from those times when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, fellow citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out the time in preparation for some impending moment that God has in store for us.

Here, then, is how we learn to strive, to achieve, and not to yield – not as a means of control, but because we believe that God is in our midst and has a plan for us. Here is faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God's will to be done, and to listen and watch for what we are called to do. This is faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the

ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God's embrace, we experienced what the hymnwriter John Ylvisaker has called "just one last surprise," God's promise of abundant and eternal life. God's plan for God's transfigured people.

And so in these pandemic times, while we seek to take control, to make sense of it all, to find some sense of the normal, maybe this transfiguration story can frame our Lenten journeys once again – maybe this story can remind us that "change is gonna come" on that brilliant Easter morning when God revealed God's awesome plan for all of creation.

In his recent book, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, Biblical scholar and poet Walter Brueggemann shares this compelling prayer for these times – may it be our guide as people of faith, Easter people learning to let go and to let God...

At the Edge of a New Normal

Our "normal ways" are reassuring to us:

It is our normal way to slot people for wealth or poverty;

It is our normal way to classify people as "us" and "other";

It is our normal way to prefer males to the other gender;

It is our normal way to distinguish heteros and the "other."

Our usual normal make us safe,

make us happy,

leave us certain.

*Only now our normal ways are exposed as constructs of privilege
that cover over the reality of neighborly situation.*

*In the midst of the virus, we notice that the others are very much with us,
and we are all vulnerable together.*

*We sense the disruption, the loss, the dis-ease among us,
and we want our old normal to be "great again."*

Except we cannot!

*Except that you summon us to new futures made sober by the pandemic;
You require us now to imagine, to risk, and be vulnerable
as we watch the new normal emerge among us:
the blind see, lepers are cleansed, the poor have good news;
students have debts canceled, the poor have health care,
workers have a living wage, the atmosphere breathes fresh air.*

*We want to return to the old normals that yield (for some) safety and happiness,
but you dispatch us otherwise.*

*Your new normal for us requires some adjustments by us.
And adjust we will. We will live and trust and share differently.*

"All things new" is a huge stretch for us.

*But we know it is your good gift to us; with wistfulness, we receive it,
we embrace it, and
we give thanks to you. Amen.*