

Transfigured. Disoriented. Transformed.

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Scripture: Luke 9:28-43

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Have you ever felt utterly disoriented in your life? As unpredictable as life can be, one momentary experience can upend you; shake loose your sense of normality. Life may return to stability, but never again the same.

Travelling is often offers such experiences for me. You may relate, any here who have been somewhere utterly unfamiliar; foods, smells, languages, all unfamiliar. The disorientation recalibrates our sense of normal. At the time we might experience the moment as positive, or not. Either way, we will see things differently forever after.

Riding on a train in the south of France, then 20 years old, I was speaking to a person I had just met. Across from us in the coach were two high school-aged girls who were watching us and giggling. I asked them if they spoke English, they did. So I then asked: What are you giggling at. They thought that my accent was fun to listen to. My accent – I had always seen the world from one perspective. Never had I thought of myself as having an accent. A profound learning moment for me that cascaded into many, many more such moments of awareness of many other different ways of seeing something.

Up there on that mountaintop, Luke tells us, Jesus took his friends, but they could not stay awake. They are jolted out of their slumber by the stunning sight of their teacher, and Moses & Elijah, engaged in deep discussion; all three bathed in dazzling light.

We could spend time digging into the powerful symbols of this transfiguration story, but most scholars ultimately conclude that this story is about regular people encountering mystery.

There is a sense of witnessing glory in Peter's declaration, "It is good to be here." In the story there is honesty, a very human inclination to try hold onto that glory, to capture it somehow as Peter asks: Shall I make three dwellings for you...? Theologian Lori Brandt Hale quips:

All that is missing is the cosmic hand, reaching down to give Peter a good "you-are-missing-the-point" slap upside the head. ¹

What is the point of this story for you and me? Scholars point out that there is something significant in what Jesus and Moses and Elijah were talking about in that glorious, dazzling, disorienting moment for Peter & friends. The New Revised Standard translation puts it this way:

[they were]...speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. [v 31]

¹ Lori Brandt Hale. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration

That word “departure”, we are told by Bible scholars, is the Greek word, “exodos”, related to the Hebrew “exodus”, yes, indeed, the long journey made by Moses and the Israelites. Shortly after this story, Jesus will set his eyes on Jerusalem. We are on the brink of Lent, the journey towards the cross. Hopefully we will each take time in Lent to reflect on our world, on ourselves, and how we are all a part of systems that cause harm, we might even say, sometimes, systems that crucify even today. Jesus will soon have his own exodus journey, through crucifixion and into resurrection.

Those disciples didn’t understand a word, or what happened. The glory passed, and down the mountain they went, right into a crisis situation, a chance for any of the disciples to prove that they were good students of the Holy Healer. They failed miserably! Right here, where there is a huge need that the disciples can’t meet...there is the ultimate reorientation. The glory on top of that mountain disoriented them, but the real-life moment that the disciples encounter below - the father desperate to have his son healed - perhaps was the truly transformative moment for those disciples.

You see, here is a truth told many times in the Bible; our world sets for us standards of success that are unattainable, to be Bigger, Stronger, even aspire to Perfection. Well, these disciples of Luke are most definitely not perfect. They follow Jesus, in spite of - perhaps because of - their flaws. At the heart of transfiguration is the reminder of life’s mystery. To just be present in the moment, seeking God’s wisdom, and the fact that we will inevitably fall short – yet, we are still all cherished as children of God.

I wonder if those disorienting, transformative transfiguration times can be experienced also in pain and struggle of everyday life. This afternoon, some of us will be attending a book study around the CBC Canada Reads winning book, *Forgiveness*, by Mark Sakamoto. It is a true story about the author’s maternal grandfather journey through capture and imprisonment as a prisoner of war in Japan during the Second World War, and at the same time it is about his paternal grandmother’s excruciating experience as a Japanese-Canadian, who, with her family, is interned by their own government in Alberta. Somehow both grandparents find a way to choose life, when it would have been so easy to give up.

Sakamoto offers this conclusion:

My grandparents bore witness to the worst in humanity.
Yet they also managed to illuminate the finest in humanity...
How on earth did they manage that?
Forgiveness ... is a daily act that looks forward.²

Perhaps the God’s greatest handiwork in each of us is not shown in those mountaintop-wonder moments. Perhaps we are most effective instruments of God’s Grace as we face the trials and tribulations of life; when we learn and grow out of them, maybe especially failing. When our hearts are open to wonder & pain, and if we truly know that we are accompanied through the wilderness of life by the one who created us, then we know, deep down, that on the other side is new possibility.

² *Forgiveness*. (page 237) © 2014 by Mark Sakamoto.