

Exodus 34:29-35 ~ Luke 9:28-36

*Mountains and Valleys*

Transfiguration of the Lord ~ February 27, 2022

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction*

Have you ever heard of the "C & E Reunion Club"? It's a way that we fondly refer to our friends who come to church twice a year, on Christmas Eve and Easter. They get the highlights in the story of Jesus: his birth and his resurrection. But have you ever heard of the "C, T & E Reunion Club"? That's the group of Christians who only go to church three times a year: Christmas, Transfiguration and Easter... Right: that's not a thing.

Yet this Sunday, Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, is a thing that happens every year. We change the paraments and I change the stole that I wear to white. We do this for Christmas and Easter, to symbolize the high holy days of Christ's life, the Light of the World. Like Christmas and Easter, Transfiguration is also a big thing that happens to Jesus. And we read the story of Jesus' transfiguration every year on the Sunday before Lent begins. This story teaches us something significant about the glory of Christ. But it's really hard to say exactly what happened up there on the mountain. It bookends Jesus' baptism. Just like at the River Jordan, we hear again the voice of God, coming out of the clouds, confirming Jesus as God's beloved Son. This story is all God. Peter tries to get a word in, but God upstages him with a cloud and then they all freak out. Or something like that.

You will be able to see why this story is not quite up there in the C & E reunion club greatest hits. But maybe it should be. It's got more sound and light, fire, and presence, than we might want in a good bedtime story. But that's not what we're really looking for this morning. This story might be just the thing we are looking for, but didn't know it. And this year is our chance to let Luke teach us about this event that words cannot possibly contain.

According to Luke's telling, it starts with Jesus taking Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray. Something Jesus often did at night. Luke especially tells us about how Jesus' life is absolutely threaded throughout with prayer. On this night, right after he made his first passion prediction to his disciples, he invites those three to join him on his night time prayer vigil. They will be joined by two other mysterious guests before the night is through. One whose face was also changed by God on a mountain.

And now I invite you to come along up the mountain with Jesus to pray, as I read Luke 9 beginning at verse 28.

### Sermon

Where are you, right now? Perhaps you are at a low point, where just making it here this morning, or even deciding to open up your device to livestream this service, was a struggle. Or maybe you came in with a bounce in your step and a smile in your heart: high on the mountain of a great weekend, a problem solved, a new relationship deepening. Or, maybe you are just slogging through, maintaining status quo, days and nights that line up predictably according to plan and schedule. Hoping that perhaps this service might actually end at 10:30 for once.

You may be wondering how this odd story helps us understand who we are, where we are, how to move forward today. On the Sunday of the week that Russian troops invaded the Ukraine, the worst incursion in Europe since WWII? Or how the glory of God figures in to what seems like anything *but* transfigured prices of food and fuel, we face at the grocery and when gassing up our vehicle. And while the news on the COVID front is good: Hospitalizations and death rates dramatically diminished, the political rancor and fall out continues. We wonder just Where is our road to recovery may be. We are looking for the path forward. How does this story shine light on where we are today?

If we open our eyes to the depths of this story, we will encounter not only light but also darkness. That's what Luke teaches us. He alone, adds the detail about the content of Jesus' conversation with the mystical appearance of Moses and Elijah, he writes: "They were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:31) The word translated as "departure" in the Greek is *exodus*. That's right. Exodus, like when Moses led with God's help to deliver the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Exodus, as in death, death on the cross that Jesus was headed toward. And an exodus that leads to freedom, freedom from sin through the resurrection. A loaded word, indeed. A word infused with darkness and light.

These guys, Moses and Elijah, knew about departures first hand. They had already experienced mysterious deaths and departures not like other people. These had also experienced mountaintop appearances of God, right in the midst or on the heels of horrendous, scary and scarring experiences: Moses going back up the mountain after the Golden Calf debacle, and the reboot of the ten commandments (Ex. 34:29-35 story occurs right after that); and Elijah was fleeing for his life from Jezebel and Ahaz when he had his epiphany of the "still, small voice." Both Moses and Elijah had been rejected by many of their own people. Their presence with Jesus was not simply as figures to represent the Law and the prophets. I believe they were there in that moment more as

friends, allies, homies, human encouragers, for Jesus as he faced down the dark valley ahead.

Here's what we I see that we can learn about, even celebrate: the glory of Christ is present to us not only dazzling in brilliant, mystical light on the mountaintop. Truly a glorious scene with the voice of God from a cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen," with Moses and Elijah next to him. But this story points to the glory of Christ, equally present to us when he is hanging on a cross between two thieves, covered with sweat and blood, with darkness descending rather than light. You may recall it was at that moment that a Roman Centurion, rather than God, looks at him and says something similar: "Truly this man was God's son." Jesus' glory spans the spectrum from the highest mountain to the deepest valley. Christ went higher and lower than we could ever go.

When Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician, physicist, inventor, philosopher, writer and Catholic theologian died in 1662, his servant found a scrap of paper hidden in the lining of his coat. "It turned out to be a testimony of something that had happened eight years earlier, which Pascal had written down and kept close to his heart. He wrote:

*In the year of Grace 1654,  
On Monday, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November...  
from about half past ten in the evening  
until about half past twelve  
FIRE  
God of Abraham, God of Isaac,  
God of Jacob  
Not of the philosophers and scholars.  
Certitude, Certitude, Feeling. Joy. Peace.  
God of Jesus Christ.*

It's hard to know what actually happened, but whatever happened to him, the word FIRE was all he could say about it. For two whole hours, nothing but FIRE, and undeniably the fire of God." He kept record of this epiphany sewn into his breast coat pocket to his dying day.<sup>1</sup> Something happened in those two hours. Something beyond words. Pascal kept silent about this experience his whole life. "Sometimes it's hard to know in the moment when we've had an epiphany" a sudden, vivid experience of the sacred. That was an observation of a person at our "First Look" Bible study last Tuesday, as we considered the silence of Peter, James and John as they descended the mountain.

We can learn so much from the saints: the ones whose stories are in our Bible, those in our tradition and other sacred traditions, like Pascal. And we can learn and grow

from hearing the stories and reflection of the saints right here at FPC. If only they were written down where we could have them at our finger tips. Great news: we do! Thanks to all of you, and the idea of Carmen's, our very own FPC "Full to the Brim" Lenten daily devotional booklet is ready. A copy is waiting for you in the Narthex. Please call the office and we will be delighted to mail one to you, if you are unable to get here to pick one up. Traverse the mountains and valleys that our family of faith has shared in word and in art form, from very young children to very grown, grown-ups 😊

Friends, wherever you are right now, Christ is calling you to let your story, in all its darkness and light, lead to God's greater glory here and now. Not later, but now. I will share just one more, one sentence diary entry written by a thirteen-year-old girl, to spur us through the valleys and up the mountains for the greater good of all. She wrote, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." What a sweet idea, we might say. Naïve, even. Until we realize that it was Anne Frank, who wrote this in her diary at age 13, during her 761 days of hiding from the Nazis in the Secret Annex, of her father's business. Let us never forget that she and the other people in hiding were discovered and arrested by police officers on August 4, 1944 and taken to the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp; and then to Bergen-Belsen where she would become another victim of the Holocaust.<sup>ii</sup> Indeed her writings, her diary would improve the world, immeasurably.

If you are among the scarred and the scared. If you want to believe, but aren't sure what or how to believe. *Wherever* you are right now: hear me when I say: this story, and this God is *for* you, *with* you, seeing you as you are. And calling *you* beloved. Embracing and holding *you*. From these moments of presence and connection we are given new light, fresh perspective, a resurgence of energy for the tasks ahead. We know that God of the mountains and the valleys, is with us. Christ went to the mountain and to the cross for us: The glory of Christ for us to see and to share.

---

<sup>i</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. W.F. Trotter (Collier: New York, NY, 1910), 195 as quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*, (Cowley Publications: Boston, Mass, 1998), 87.

<sup>ii</sup> [www.annefrank.org](http://www.annefrank.org)