



“Mountains Out of Molehills”

Cheryl Fields Tyler

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Exodus 24:12-18 & Matt. 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of Jesus is one of the most familiar images in Christianity. As I was preparing for this sermon today I was really struck by how familiar this image is to almost anyone in the Christian world. Just picture the art in the great cathedrals, or think about walking through art galleries, or perhaps the Catholic church you grew up in or visited, or the Greek orthodox church you visited for a wedding or festival. There's bound to be an image of Jesus with a fully radiant face, hovering just above ground, caught up in clouds, with Moses on one side and Elijah on the other.

These idealized depictions of the transfiguration make the transfiguration story one that feels particularly bound to time and place, one that in our modern context we think of automatically as requiring movie-like special effects. Indeed, you can almost hear the soundtrack when you look at these images.

Any yet, some version of the transfiguration story appears in 3 of the four gospels, namely in Matthew, Luke, and Mark—and the transfiguration narrative is so central to our tradition, we need to get beyond the special effects and seek understanding of this story for us. I think to get that understanding we first need to understand the transfiguration story in the context of the first century—and allow the deeper radiance of truth in these stories to shine through.

First, let's just review the highlights. Jesus and three friends are going on a hike at a mountain nearby—what we might call today some “guy bonding time”. At some point, Peter, James, and John are hiking along with Jesus, and Jesus become supernaturally illuminated, and they suddenly see two of the true heroic figures of Judaism, namely Moses and Elijah, with him. Peter, being the “cornerstone of the church” kind of guy he was, saw this sight and immediately wants to build monuments commemorating the event. At which point God's presence overwhelmed them in the form of a cloud and a voice came from the cloud saying “This is my Son, my Beloved. I am well pleased by him. Listen to Him.” Not surprisingly, the disciples, when they hear this, fell to the ground, terrified and having no clue what just happened. But, Jesus went to them and touched them and told them not to be afraid. When they looked up, Jesus was suddenly alone, and looked like his old self. The Voice and the cloud were gone.

So what does this mean? In short, my sense is that fundamentally the transfiguration narrative is sort of a “Cliff Notes” summary of the issues confronting the early Christian church.

First, the whole transfiguration notion was relatively commonplace in this milieu. Given the historical context, if his followers were to have any credibility, Jesus’ transfiguration was pretty much a necessity. No one in the Jewish tradition could attain anything like the status claimed for Jesus without it. Transfiguration narratives of various sorts are throughout the Jewish Bible, from Moses and Elijah to Isaiah and Ezekiel. Just as important however, is the non-Jewish context of the first century. Just think of the stories you know from Greek and Roman mythology and how many of those include similar moments of sudden luminescence and divine revelation. But, if that’s the case, why the admonishment in some versions of the story—for instance right after the passage in Matthew that Tom read this morning—that the disciples keep the news to themselves? Some biblical scholars have observed that the various “no one told” explanations at the end of all of the Transfiguration stories are a not-so-subtle way of explaining why lots of people didn’t hear about Jesus’ transfiguration until well after the fact. This first century version of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy had to be explained somehow.

Second, by the time the gospels were committed to paper--so to speak--there was a fairly significant amount of variety in the oral tradition about Jesus. The gospels took shape sometime during the second half of the first century, at the earliest. Some believe it was well into the second century before the oral traditions had been fully documented and edited into anything like their modern form. No one knows for sure why it took so long, but it was probably some combination of expectation of the imminent return of the resurrected Christ and the rapid growth of the movement that put the focus on the oral tradition. Most think that by the time the gospels were written the primary goal was to create some clear boundaries about what were the essential tenets of faith for the early church—and what wasn’t. Since the divinity of Jesus was certainly on the “must have” list of essential tenets, the transfiguration story is a convenient answer to all those critics and skeptics who doubted the miracles or even doubted the resurrection. In essence, according to this narrative, we know Jesus was the son of God because quite literally, “God said so.”

And finally, the transfiguration narratives are a clear, culturally relevant response to all those who were questioning how the early Christians fit in the religious and political landscape. The early Christians were trying to position themselves as a logical extension of the Jewish tradition and as a spiritual kingdom not a political one—without an affront to either the Jews or Rome. They were realistically fearful of being seen as either a power-hungry political movement to Rome or a challenge to the Jewish establishment—or both. In the nuanced socio-political context of the early church, the message inherent in the transfiguration narratives was clear. Jesus in is line with Moses and Elijah—his standing as a Jewish leader is unblemished. But, we are building no monuments or temples that challenge Rome’s geo-political power nor are we dissing the Jewish community’s heroes. The message is this: We heard God’s voice in Jesus. We are still listening and following where he leads us.

In short, the transfiguration narrative was central to the credibility and viability of the Christian community. It spoke to the specific concerns and traditions of that time and place to make Jesus' message and the early church's response to it sensible and weighty. It was absolutely central to the early Christians' sense of divine revelation and identity.

But given our very different context, what does it speak to us?

If we consider this story in the larger context of Transfiguration narratives that are ubiquitous across all religions—and indeed across all human experience—I see something deeply true about how we encounter God—about how we see and hear God.

From this hike with Jesus and his friends, to the enlightenment of Rumi, to Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, what is striking is their remarkable similarities. There is the notion of something or someone ordinary—Jesus and his friends on a hike up to a familiar mountain, Annie Dillard looking again at a cedar tree she has seen hundreds if not thousands of times, Rumi noticing a full moon lighting up his house—in other words a moment within the realm of everyday human experience. And then it happens: illumination, literal and figurative. God's presence radiates. There is a divine message—either heard, or somehow just “known” in illuminating clarity—that brings life-changing new insight. And while it seems like the change is happening “out there,” the real transfiguration is happening inside those experiencing it. Jesus was transfigured, but Peter, James, and John came down the mountain as changed men.

I think as contemporary liberal Christians, we don't know what to do with this. Our scholarship has taken Jesus out of the transfiguring cloud of *shekhinah* light and brought him back down to ground as a historical figure—and rightly so, in my opinion. But as we look at Jesus only through the lens of history, justice, and morality, we risk forgetting or minimizing the encounter of Emmanuel, God with Us, that was the lasting promise of Jesus.

This year in their 7th grade Language Arts class, Sage and Maya are doing a year-long Autobiography project. One of the first assignments of that project has been for the kids to understand their family history through the development of a genealogy—and the assignment was to go back as far as you could on your family tree, at least 5 generations. Now, their teacher made clear that this was to be a “family project”—and you can imagine that for contemporary families, so many of whom live far away from grandparents and outside of their families' places of origin, how challenging this is. All I can say is thank you Lord, for Ancestry.com. So, in the past couple of months, I have spent a lot of hours at Ancestry.com, and I have to say it's really been fascinating. We have learned so much more than I ever knew possible about our family history.

One of the consequences of this journey back in time is the flood of memories it's brought back to me about my own family—my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents and the little snippets of stories that I remember hearing them tell each other, as I listened when I was a very young child.

One of the stories I've been remembering this week as I prepared for this sermon was about my Mom's father, whom I knew as Grandpa Keister. He was a pharmacist, and he and my Grandmother owned a Walgreens drug store and old-fashioned soda

fountain restaurant on Main Street in Sturgis, MI. He was a descendent of a long line of German farmers who came first to Virginia and then made their way to Ohio and Indiana. His people were “Dunkereds” as my mother called them—you may have heard of them by the more common name “Anabaptists.” The Anabaptists broke off from the Lutheran orthodoxy in Germany in the 16th and 17th centuries, centrally over the issue of the availability of and necessity for a personal experience of God. The Anabaptist or “Dunker” name comes from one of the key differences they had with the Lutherans—namely, they rejected infant baptism and believed in full immersion baptism, and only after a conscious, transformative, personal experience of God. The Amish, Mennonites and later the Baptists come from this branch of the Christian family tree. My grandfather’s people came from an American offshoot of the early German Anabaptists similar to the Amish, known as the Church of the Brethren—or sometimes just “The Brethren.” They had a lifestyle very similar to the Amish or Mennonites—eschewing modernity, driving horse-drawn buggies instead of cars, wearing plain dark clothes, the men with beards, the women with their long hair tied up in a bun at the back with a little white cap. By the time I was on the scene, many of the children and grandchildren had begun to leave the old ways, but I remember as a small girl going to family reunions and seeing the buggies lined up in the parking lot together with the cars.

My grandfather had been widely criticized as the black sheep of his family, leaving the farm and going to pharmacy school. At one point he even moved my grandma and my Mom to California, searching for a way to leave the confines of his background behind and find a freer, better life. But, after just a year, his family essentially guilted him back to Indiana and Michigan, and he lived his life torn between the solemn, frugal, obligatory obedience of his childhood and the freedom, joy, and possibility he so craved and that took him off the farm in the first place.

By the time I was old enough to be conscious, it was clear even to me that he was in so many ways a tortured man, so desiring of joy and yet so very full of self-recrimination and guilt for it. By the time I was 12 or 13, his battle inside, exacerbated by a long, hard recession and the change in small towns everywhere that took shoppers from Main Street to the discount retailer outside of downtown, had taken on cosmic dimensions, and he wrote my Mom long, long letters telling her of his visions and dreams, of devils and angels, of Armageddon and Heaven. We all feared for his sanity and his survival, and the store teetered on the brink of bankruptcy.

And then something inexplicable happened. He had what he called an “illumination” or a revelation by God one night in his house, and that one night shifted his reality forever. His German work ethic was so strong that it took a few years for him to close out his store, but he did let my Grandmother close the restaurant and a few years later he sold-out the store. As soon as the last fixture left the building, they bought a huge lime green Lincoln Continental and a 20 ft. trailer and set out for the West. In the 6 years they had before he died, they travelled constantly and they both said those were the best times of their lives and their marriage.

I don’t know what happened to my grandfather, but I know it changed him. While his story is a pretty radical one, I bet you all have your own stories. Maybe more like Rumi and Annie Dillard, more like a full-moon night in your house, or a hike in the woods, than visions of Moses and Elijah.

Think about your own experience. When have been your moments of illumination? The moments when you knew in an inexplicable way that you are beloved? That you are held? That you are healed? That you are forgiven? That you are whole? That your life matters? That there is grace? That in ways we can't understand, hope beyond death is real?

I think sometimes in the liberal protestant church we don't exactly know how to talk about these moments of encounter, of illumination, of transfiguration. I think sometimes we minimize them, take them out of the realm of the holy, forget the mystery. We aren't sure how to name them, if we should name them. We can, I think, make molehills out of mountains.

This morning, my deep prayer is that we all remember—we too have been to the mountain. We built no monuments, we may not have told anyone, but we have been changed.

Remember your own mountain top moments. Tell your stories to others. Just think how the world would be different if Peter, James, John, and all the others who encountered the historical Jesus and living Christ would not have told their stories.

God seeks to be known in the ordinary circumstance of humanity. Affirm it. Name it. A mundane moment can reveal the holy, can be transcendent and illuminating. The mountain top experience of Peter, James, and John is only one of innumerable events of divine illumination across history. Indeed, the core tenet of the Emmanuel Jesus story is true: God *is* with us.

Remember. Tell your stories. And watch and listen. For God is still speaking. God seeks to know us and to be known by us. Come to the mountain. Alleluia! Amen!