Transfigured by Imagination

Luke 9:28-36
Sunday, March 2, 2025 - Transfiguration Sunday
Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The mystery of the Transfiguration invites us to broaden our imagination by listening to what Jesus will tell us.

"The mountains are calling," John Muir wrote to his sister in 1873, "and I must go." Muir was writing a letter to his sister, describing his inner yearning to study and preserve the pristine beauty of California's Yosemite Valley. The full quote is "The mountains are calling and I must go and I will work on while I can, studying incessantly." [1]

Long before Muir's words found themselves plastered on postcards and t-shirts and coffee mugs; they were expressions of Muir's fascination with the transcendent beauty of the mountains. He would later write, "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine into trees.

Millions have followed Muir's call to the Sierra Nevada mountains, but also to the striking peaks of the Great Smoky Mountains in Appalachia to the soaring heights of Alaska's Denali, to Everest or Kilimanjaro, The meaning beneath his words have summoned Presbyterians to seek the thin spaces of Montreat, North Carolina, an entire civilization to the Mounds in Cahokia, IL, prophets to Horeb, worshippers to Zion, pilgrims to pilgrims to Arafat, Rome, and so many other places.

Whether we hike or backpack or stand near National Park parking lots with wide-eyed wonder, there is something powerfully renewing about being called into the mountains. For these reasons, mountains figure prominently in scripture: they are places of encountering God, as Moses has encountered God at Sinai. In the mountains, God's presence is revealed to those who seek him. In Matthew, Jesus proclaims the message of the kingdom from a mountain, echoing Moses' recitation of the law. Mountains are also places of great danger. Recall the prayer of the Psalmist in Psalm 121, where the traveler

[1] See https://www.onverticality.com/blog/john-muir-quote-1

headed to Jerusalem scans the horizon and exclaims, “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help?”

Long before I had ever heard of John Muir or had thought about role mountains play in our faith, a buddy of mine and I decided to scale the highest peak in our neighborhood – a squatty foothill nicknamed “D Mountain,” for whatever reason. One summer morning we packed an old knapsack with the essentials – a canteen of water, sunglasses, and cookies – and headed out of the neighborhood, and across a four-lane highway about two miles from our street. We undoubtedly trespassed over numerous empty lots, a small industrial park and then climbed the four or five hundred feet of this hill which overlooked our community. It was thrilling, exhausting. A taste of danger and exploration, and an invitation to imagine how we fit into the sprawling neighborhoods below.

On Transfiguration Sunday, the church recalls the moment when Jesus called the disciples to the mountains. It is a story of dazzling light and revelation. We may not understand or even know what exactly happened on that mountain, even though Matthew, Mark and Luke each share a version of the story. We read it every year at the close of the season of Epiphany, just before entering Lent. It is as if we hear Jesus saying to us, “The mountains are calling, and you must go.”

Jesus’ trek up the mountain is one of those stories which may leave you scratching your head in disbelief and confusion. Commentators remind us that it is a great hinge moment in the gospel. It comes as Jesus is about to set out toward the cross, and while we may not understand or know all that happened on the mountain, we know it was a tremendous moment. It was not just the mountains that were calling – it was God, and so Jesus heads up into the clouds with James, John, and Peter.

The trio of disciples represent his inner circle, the ones to whom the ongoing proclamation of the kingdom will be given. They have no idea why he has called them to this moment, though the story’s context might give us a clue. Luke tells us this happens eight days after Jesus has asked them, “Who do the people say that I am?” He followed that by another question, “Who do *you* say that I am?” He has told them that following him will not be easy. It will be an uphill climb, filled with struggle and hardship.

And then, as he so often does, Jesus follows his instructions by showing them what he means. The mountains are calling, he says, and we must go. The disciples are

clueless, so he helps seed their imagination by telling them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

I don’t know about you, but that statement sounds more terrifying than reassuring. Do you think that would help us grow the church if we put those words on a sign near Clayton Road? It might attract attention—but would it stimulate your imagination? Would it encourage you or be an impetus to grow in faith?

We live in a time of broken-ness and confusion. Injustice and war threaten human life. We are afflicted by disasters, and bombarded by confusing messages. Even the words of our leaders do not bring us assurance. It is tempting to give up on everything. Yet Jesus is calling. He still speaks, saying to us, “You will see the kingdom of God.”

Because we read this story right before Lent, it can be tempting to see Transfiguration as a sort of Mardi Gras moment in the Gospels. Jesus is throwing his own version of a Mardi Gras party, minus the food, drink, and beads. I imagine Peter, James, and John would probably have preferred the food and drink. There are no parades and no beads, just Jesus praying. But, in that moment he is somehow changed. It is inexplicable—no matter how many times we read this story, or how frequently I turn to it to preach, it somehow seems beyond our grasp.

I have come to see this moment as an invitation to rediscover the gift of imagination. The disciples are so astounded by the flashes of lightening and mysterious appearance of Elijah and Moses that they become “weighed down with sleep.” Some translations suggest that the did not actually fall asleep, but instead are jolted by what they see.

Peter’s reaction is impulsive. He springs into action. He is the quintessential Presbyterian: he doesn’t just stand there, he instead jumps into action. Let’s do something! Let’s start a building campaign! Peter’s response is a warning to all of us who believe that these moments of transcendence should lead us to get busy. Let’s do something.

It’s a typical response to overwhelming mystery. When mystery sweeps over us, we may be prompted to stop thinking imaginatively. We think we need to anchor this experience in this moment, to somehow preserve it.

There was a preacher who decided to do something that would really drive home the meaning of the Transfiguration. He found an idea hidden in a book. “To make

Transfiguration Sunday really come alive," the article read, "go out a rent a portable fog machine for your church. Fill it with dry ice. Next, project large photos of Moses and Elijah and Jesus up on a large screen. At the right moment, turn off the pictures of Moses and Elijah so that Jesus is left by himself. Let someone with a big, booming voice read "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!"

And then, scrawled in the margins was a note from someone who had obviously tried this before. "THIS IS IMPORTANT!" read the penciled comment. "And then, before to turn off the fog machine."

When I read this, I thought, there's no way we're going to bring in a fog machine. We have had enough problems with smoke detectors and fire alarms and we certainly don't need Metro West crashing our worship.

Instead, we ought to let this experience speak for itself. Since nothing about this encounter may make sense, why not allow our imagination to fill in the blanks? Look at what happens: when the visitors leave, and the fireworks stop, nothing is left but a thick, dense cloud covering the summit. In that moment, the disciples are filled with fear.

Suddenly Peter's action plans seem irrelevant. In the moment of their greatest fear, a voice calls out to them: "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him."

These are the words we need to hear. In the fears we face, in the uncertainty of our lives, in the tumult raging around us, and the assault on goodness and mercy, we need the assurance which inspires an imaginative faith. "This is my Son…listen to him."

Thee were the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, but this time they are instructions to the church. These are not just words to make us feel better, but words that call us to speak and act knowing God has come close to us. Come up to the mountains where the air is thin and God's presence is palpable. Feel that presence sweep over you in the moment of your fears.

God indeed is with us. We shall trust and not be afraid. Amen.