

**EPCSLD02.26.17**  
**Emory Presbyterian church**  
**Matthew 17: 1-9 Transfiguration**  
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**“Trailing Clouds of Glory”**

You know, for me Transfiguration Sunday ranks right up there with Trinity Sunday as a revelation I'm not all that keen about preaching. There's only so many times a preacher can comment on certain of God's revelations, as if they have any idea what's going on. Moreover, many of us in the Reformed tradition are just not all that keen on mystery. For 23 years now I've done the best I can with the Transfiguration, and with the Trinity, too; but comes a time you just need to get out of the way and let someone new give it a try. So I was all about signing Aaron up to preach today – he brings a freshness to everything he does – until Elizabeth Ann got born and her baptism, scheduled for today.

Mind, the date for Elizabeth's baptism was carefully chosen: before my departure date in mid-March but *not* before her immune system could gear up. Which is all in accordance with our Book of Order which says that baptisms are meant to be performed “without undue haste or unnecessary delay.” Which, for Elizabeth, meant today. So I changed my mind. Or it got changed for me. About Transfiguration. About mystery. About preaching.

Because for one thing, no way am I going to up an opportunity to preach when there's a baptism. In a church this size, a baptism is a big deal. Nearly everybody gets excited about it. Which, of course, is the way baptism's meant to be in the Reformed tradition – a community event that everybody participates in. For Presbyterians, baptisms are not so much about anybody getting saved – Jesus having already taken

care of that end of things - as about how we as a community surround Elizabeth Ann, saying, “‘lookie what God’s just done!, standing ‘bewildered before love like this.’ (Cloud of Uknowing)

And, seeing what’s God’s just done in Elizabeth Ann, we are moved to ask ourselves , ‘and now what are we going to do about Elizabeth Ann? And in baptism, we answer that question before God by promising together to raise and nurture Elizabeth as a child in Christ. Like I say every Sunday, ‘in baptism *God claims us* as God’s beloved ones.’ In baptism is, we also claim God’s beloved ones as our own, promising to raise them in the love of Christ. This is baptism in the Reformed tradition.

And I have to traffic with a little Transfiguration in order to get there, why, bring it on. Anyway, having a baby around may help – for who *can’t* see the ‘trailing clouds of glory’ around a newborn?

So let’s get to it. First let me set the stage. Leading up to the Transfiguration, a lot’s been going on: Jesus has performed a bunch of miracles, healing this person, feeding that one, blessing the other; outwitted the Pharisees, repeatedly annoyed the authorities, and so forth. After all this, he asks his disciples, so ‘who do *you* think I am?’ And Simon replies, ‘the Messiah,’ so Jesus changes his name to Peter, the rock, on which he will build his church. But then Peter, who never seems to know when to shut up, says ‘no way you’re going to Jerusalem to suffer and die.’ At which point Jesus changes his name again, this time to ‘Satan.’

Okay, then...Matthew 17: 1-13, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then

Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.' And the disciples asked him, 'Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He replied, 'Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

Right. So what would *you* do with that?

Jesus starts glowing, two other prophetic poltergeists show up, God chimes in, and the disciples scratch their heads.

I'll tell you some messages I and others have pitched over the years, that the Transfiguration is about:

The mystery of the Godhead made manifest in Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus Christ trumping prior prophets.

The frequent inaccessibility of truth.

The ephemeral nature of revelation.

The cluelessness of the early disciples.

The human inclination, when befuddled, to get busy.

The fundamental foolishness of busyness.

The inescapable requirement after any peak experience to come on down from the mountain.

The long dark valley at the bottom of the mountain that nobody wants to walk because it leads to the cross.

Take your pick. Or choose 'none of the above.' It's not as if the Transfiguration or any other transrational scriptural revelation comes with footnotes. The truth is, it's a mystery, which some say is the best name for God. Mystery. But we Presbyterians, we prefer to have things to be explained. Clearly. Carefully. Articulately. Ad nauseum. But we're not the only ones in this post enlightenment, post-modern, 'post-truth' world we live in. The generally favored point of departure in all the Western world is dualistic facts. Or, alternative facts. Either way, things are either good or bad, true or not true, real or not real.

So what are we to do with Mystery? Really, there's no explaining it. (Hence the name.) All that can really be said with any certainty about the Transfiguration is that *something* happened up there on the mountain that *nobody* could explain. That nobody really knew what to do with. So how do the disciples react? A lot like we do when something beyond our understanding takes place: first they are afraid, then confused, then they come up with an action plan to help them feel more in control. In the face of mysteries like the Transfiguration, or death, or grace, or unmerited forgiveness, baked a casserole, write a thank you note, build a hut. Who doesn't prefer order and reason to cosmic significance and soulful seeing? (Falling Upward, Richard Rohr, p. 68)

But up there on the mountain, those disciples definitely see things differently. See Jesus differently. Or is it God they are seeing? For sure they see Light. A kind of

overwhelming Light that scares them. And puts them in their place. Because of its brightness? Because of its power? Because of its love?

‘Lookie what God just did!’ they exclaim to one another, standing bewildered before Light like that. Then can’t help but ask themselves, ‘and what are we meant to do about what God’s just done?’ It should come as no surprise that, like most of us before mysteries, (ask any parent before their newborn) they don’t have the first clue.

But we aren’t required to understand Mystery, or explain it, or necessarily *do* something about it so, much as simply to witness it, to recognize it, regard, and receive it, listen to it, “behold the light, and whence it flows, and see it in our (awe and) joy.” And then, once we come down off the mountain, to be *changed* by it.

‘Awe’ changes us, does it not? Opens our eyes, lifts the veil from them, drops the scales from them, changes what we see?. Changes *how* we see?

It’s been said that we don’t see things the way *they* are; we see things the way *we* are. Which begs the question of who was really being transfigured up there on the mountain, Jesus or the disciples? Maybe Jesus looks the way Jesus always looks but something falls away from the eyes of the disciples such that they can finally see who he really *is*. And changing what and how the disciples see, changes what and how they are, what and how they do. Whatever happened up there on that mountain, it’s enough to move ’em on down, across the valley, and clear over to the foot of the cross. Which is some place they *really* didn’t want to go.

Maybe this is one reason Transfiguration occurs just before Ash Wednesday – to offer the spiritual sustenance we’ll all need for the long, difficult journey through Lent to the cross, a place most of us don’t want to go, either.

And, too, maybe this is why God made babies so irresistibly adorable – to seed and nourish the love needed to see them through the miseries of, say, adolescence – another place no one wants to go.

But don't take my word for it. Just look in the eyes of Elizabeth Ann and see if something doesn't change...in you. See if the curious composite of guileless innocence and wisdom beyond measure, the heart breaking fragility and infinite potential, in short, the mystery of what God did in Elizabeth, doesn't open your hearts, and soften you, snatch your attention into the present, and make you feel warm, and tender, and loving. Can you see why God came to us in a baby? Can you see how God comes to us in a baby? Talk about a transfiguration! Still, the miracle is less God's transfiguration than our own. The miracle is when God's Transfiguration transfigures *us*, such that we see things differently, which alter who and how we are, with and for the world.

Of course, invariably it's a transient change in us, isn't it. For some it takes a lifetime of following Jesus finally to begin to see him differently. For others, the endless practice of faith to amplify the Spirit of God within us. And still for others, to surrender to God's claim on us takes a fierce, interminable struggle, like Jacob at Peniel. Then again, for many of us, at least for a minute, all it takes is the gaze of the Eternal looking back at us through the unfocussed eyes of a baby.

To the glory of God. Amen.