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First Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 9:28-43

### **“Transfiguration”**

Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

28Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" — not knowing what he said. 34While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

37On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." 41Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." 42While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

*God of glory and majesty, bathe us in the bright fire of your transforming love. Gift us with the Holy Spirit that we may boldly live each day as children of your realm. Amen.*

A few years ago, my Mom and I got to talking about my childhood home. I remarked to her that I dream about the home, and in my dreams I can remember the home's details like I lived there yesterday, which isn't all that surprising-for even though I moved out of that home many years ago, I did live on Stockbridge Road up until the time I was married-save for the years I was away at school-and our wedding reception was held there. So I have lots of memories of that home. My Mom said she rarely dreams of the house, but she does have dreams of the house she grew up in. Like me, she has lots of memories of her childhood home.

I find that memories can be powerful things that can either hold us back or give us strength to face the future. In the case of my childhood home, I can cling to the memory and mourn the fact that my parents sold the old home a few years back, or I can let those wonderful memories inspire me to create a similar home for my children.

In the gospel lesson we heard this morning Luke tells of a memory, a glorious memory of a wonderful time that could either hold the disciples back from fulfilling their mission, or give them the strength to go on. The wonderful memory Luke tells us about is of the transfiguration, that moment in time when Jesus turns a dazzling, glowing white in front of the disciples and scares them half to death when he does so.

Eight days before this unbelievable experience, Jesus and the disciples had been making their way through gentile towns and villages. Jesus had performed numerous miracles along the way: he healed people, exorcised demons, fed a crowd of 5000, cured a leper and walked on water. The crowds following Jesus had grown larger and larger as word of his miracles spread. It's like Jesus had become a rock star and the disciples were his entourage soaking up his popularity, some of which was rubbing off on them.

But then Jesus asked his disciples a really odd question: “Who do people say that I am?” Well, they replied, some people say you’re John the Baptist and others say you’re Elijah. Yes, but who do you say that I am, he asks them?

This is when Peter made his stunning confession and answered, “You are the Messiah.”

Peter’s confession gives Jesus the opportunity he needs to let the disciples know that life is going to get hard for him. “I may be treated like a rock star now,” he says, “but in due time the paparazzi and fans will turn on me.” He tells them quite openly that he’ll be rejected and killed, and if they want to follow him, it will cost them.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

These are dark and dismal predictions. I can only imagine that in the eight days between these predictions and the transfiguration, life was very, very bleak for the disciples. It’s as if they had just received the worst diagnosis imaginable for the man they had come to love and admire and trust the most. Some of you have been in that same situation, so you can relate to how the disciples felt.

And therefore you can understand why Peter made the odd suggestion of staying on top of the mountain. After all the bad news of the previous week, it’s no wonder that Peter got caught up in the wonderful moment and suggested they build 3 little tents in which to keep Jesus, Moses and Elijah. “We won’t ever have to leave,” he seems to be saying. “Those awful things you said would happen won’t happen if we never go down. We can be happy here forever.” Peter wants to make the memory last. He wants to hang on to that moment forever.

Peter’s suggestion to encapsulate Jesus, Moses, and Elijah into a tent may seem ridiculous, but it’s also a natural reaction. Let’s just retreat into

memory. Let's live there. Let's emotionally decamp to the past. It really is alluring to hunker down with the sweet memory and just settle in. When the future swarms with unknowns, how secure it is to just hide away in the present moment.

But Jesus refused to stay on the mountain. He refused to hide away in the present moment, even though choosing to do that would have spared him his life. Instead, Jesus went down the mountain-disciples in tow-and met the big crowd that awaited him. There, he met a desperate father whose only son was sick to the point of death. "Suddenly a spirit seizes him," the father said. "And all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not."

The painter Raphael depicts this chaotic scene in his painting *The Transfiguration*. Stuck at the foot of the mountain, the disciples cannot cure the sick boy. Frustration is palpable in the outstretched arms and panicked faces of the crowd. But in that crowd are two figures, pointing in the direction of the mountain, toward the sky, in which the transfigured Jesus shines. This is the Jesus who will come down from the mountain and bring life and healing to the boy. This is the Jesus who refused to hide away in the present moment. This is the Jesus who knew that life is not made up exclusively of mountain top experiences. This is the Jesus who knew that life is often lived on the plain, where the alleluia moments can sometimes seem elusive.

Luke's version of the transfiguration, unlike Mark's and Mathew's versions- is quite explicit in telling us that that there will be glorious moments in life full of alleluias, but there will also be moments of sickness and disease and even death.

On Transfiguration Sunday, we really are suspended in a sense between the season of Epiphany which clings to the joy of Christmas and the season of Lent, which walks us to the cross.

And Luke pays attention to the small details in crafting his version of the Transfiguration. And in these details we discover the Alleluia-Lent contrast.

At first, on the mountain, the appearance of Jesus' face changes and "his clothes become dazzling white" (9:29). Later in the story, however, this visual "alleluia" fades. A cloud overshadows Jesus and the disciples who are with him. The disciples are terrified. The cloud and its darkness seem to signal future troubles. On the mountaintop alleluia is, in a sense, both greeted and bidden farewell.

Now had Jesus stayed on the mountain, he would only have known these wonderful experiences, these mountain-top moments, as we call them. But is that enough?

I don't think it is. I don't want to think that Jesus is only there in the good times. That that's all he knows about. I want a little assurance that Jesus is with us in the bad times, too. And that he knows a little something about bad times himself. I want to believe that Jesus, in going down the mountain, setting his face to Jerusalem, and traveling all the way there-all the way to the end, knows what it's like to suffer and to live in the valleys, because he himself did so.

Fred Craddock once said that all the way to the cross, Jesus will be trying to get those who think "where the messiah is, there is no misery, to accept a new perspective: that where there is misery, there is the Messiah."

If Jesus, Peter, James and John had hunkered down in their memory, Jesus would never have been able to teach that message. Yet Jesus does refuse Peter's offer, and one verse later they're back in the real world.

I bet that Peter's memory of that mountaintop experience was something he would carry with him through the week of confusions, betrayal, shattered dreams, and innocent death. And I'm almost certain that it gave him hope in the valleys of darkness and despair.

If you can, I want you to think about a memory you have of something good happening to you. And if you can and feel comfortable, close your eyes, relax, and let your mind wander to your memory.

Maybe your memory is of a time in your life when all was well, no one was mad, pouting, or ill, and the love was so palpable, right there, shining through.

Perhaps your memory is of a personal achievement, when something you struggled with was finally realized or accomplished.

Or maybe it's of a vacation, a beach, a mountain, a dinner.  
Maybe it's some random moment of bliss that found you for no obvious reason.

Whatever it is, right now remember, just remember for a moment . . .

Now, remember the choice that lay before Peter and always lies before you. You can retreat to your memory and hunker down in it. Or you can let your memory give you strength and hope to face the future. Again and again in life, it is the memory of good things that assures us in times of doubt and despair that the good is a possibility.

When a job has become daily drudgery, remember. Remember the times when work did bring satisfaction, and in such memory find hope that work can have purpose again.

When meaning seems to have slipped out of life itself, remember when your days were animated with intentionality, and know that because it once was, it can be so again.

When your faith is dry as bones and nothing, not even God, seems clear or trustworthy, remember a time when faith shone through and know that faith can be lively again.

And so, remember.

When your life passes through some pain or loss, remember some sweet day.

When the dark reality of the moment is actually betrayal and defeat, remember a bright day.

When some cross looms before you, remember a courageous day.

In the remembering of good news, you will know that life really can be good.

In the remembering of meaning, you can know that there is meaning.

In the remembering of triumphant life in the past, you can remember that with God the final word will indeed be life triumphant.

Amen.