

# North Kildonan United Church

14<sup>th</sup> February 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “Transfiguration”

*II Kings 2: 1-12*

*Psalms 50: 1-6*

*Mark 9: 2-9*

*Holy God, you revealed to the disciples the everlasting glory of Jesus Christ. Grant us, who have not seen and yet believe, the gift of your Holy Spirit, that we may boldly live the gospel and shine with your transforming glory as people changed and changing through the redeeming presence of our Saviour. Amen.*

During these Epiphany Sundays we have been following Mark’s account of the beginning of Jesus’s ministry. But because Easter is on the early side this year, we will begin the season of Lent this coming week with an Ash Wednesday service. So today we conclude our Epiphany explorations with the story of the Transfiguration.

Matthew, Mark and Luke each have their own versions of the Transfiguration, and it should come as no surprise to anyone that today’s account from Mark is the briefest and most concise record of the three.

As we just heard, Jesus takes Peter and James and John with him up a high mountain. But this is no sightseeing trip Jesus has taken the boys on, no simple hike into the hills. This time on the mountain is the turning point for Jesus’s ministry, his turning towards Jerusalem and the culmination of his life on earth. When the four descend from this high and holy place Jesus will be a changed person, resolute in his mission to face the trials and humiliation and execution on another high place.

So his journey begins in a glorious fashion, as Mark describes the scene: *“And he (Jesus) was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.”*

Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, are in conversation with Jesus, the One who is understood as the culmination, the embodiment, the completion of the teachings of both the Law and the Prophets. For Mark, Jesus is the God and everything in the Hebrew Scriptures points to Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

And as if to put an exclamation point to the whole encounter, the voice of God speaks through the clouds, proclaiming once again, as at Jesus’s baptism so now at his transfiguration: *“This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him.”*

No wonder Peter and the other two are terrified. In his panic Peter blurts out the suggestion that three dwellings be made, for Jesus, for Elijah and for Moses, so that the moment could be kept forever.

But to stay on the mountaintop was to stop the mission Christ came to accomplish. It was now time for Jesus to come down from this isolation and to be back amongst the

people he came to save, even though that salvation would be achieved at terrible cost to him.

So Jesus and the three come down from the mountain, and once again Jesus orders them to keep this a secret until the appropriate time. The journey to Jerusalem now begins, a journey that ends in a very different way, on another hill, with the agony of the cross, humiliation instead of glorification, no comforting Hebrew patriarchs to chat with, no friends, no joy, no reassuring voice of God. Just "*three dreadful hours of great pain, O my soul...*" as the old spiritual puts it.

At the front end of Lent, we find the Jesus of the Transfiguration, the Jesus we are comfortable with, the Jesus we want, the successful, glorified, beautiful Saviour, the Jesus many proclaim and hold onto.

At the other end of Lent, we find the Jesus of Calvary, the Jesus we actually need, the One crucified by us, the One broken for our sake.

And we live the time of Lent between these two high places, between Transfiguration and Calvary.

But what of this story itself? What do we make of the Transfiguration? Let me put it another way. Doesn't the story sound just a bit strange, more than a little weird? If it does, and it's ok if it does seem odd, let's not blame Mark for getting the story wrong or accuse the gospel writer of doing a bit of creative writing.

The fault lies with us if we have problems with the Transfiguration.

In many ways we are children of the Protestant Reformation, and one of the hallmarks of that revolution in Christian thought is a strong tendency to rationalize everything, to work away at, to chisel away at understanding things until our interpretations make sense to us and we have removed all mystery from the text.

Think of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and how it is often interpreted. In a typical liberal Protestant reading of the account, the loaves and fishes did not miraculously multiply to feed the hungry and still have extra left over. No, this miracle is transformed by us into an example of good works, with the interpretation that actually the food appeared from what people had with them, and in good Protestant fashion, they all opened their lunch kits and shared their bounty with one another. So if there was a miracle, it was not the work of God, but strictly the generosity of spirit of the common woman and man to share with others. Christians of other times and other traditions might just say hogwash to that interpretation and instead hold to the belief that the Spirit of God was at work providing what was needed, and I would have to say that I tend to side with those uncomfortable with the simplistic potluck lunch theory.

What if we were to take off our Protestant Reformation rational liberal glasses and look at this text with a different set of lenses, without explaining everything away so that

it makes sense to us. We might call these lenses mystical or spiritual, but not in an empty new age spirituality kind of way.

Celtic spirituality, the Christian expressions of the Scots and Irish Gaelic tradition as well as others of that ilk, sees life in a very different way from the Roman, semi-legal and very literal tradition we in the west have inherited and somewhat suffered under for centuries.

These ancient Christians, and their modern day followers, talk of the thin places where heaven and earth almost meet, particular places that take on a mystical nature. Places almost otherworldly, places of prayer and contemplation, places of transformation, or as in today's gospel, transfiguration. Perhaps you have experienced places such as these, places of beauty and calm, places of profound peace and holiness, places of renewal and new hope. Perhaps they are in a secluded woodland or by the shore of a lake or in a sacred or special building. Places where it seems like heaven and earth almost meet. Places that defy scientific explanation yet proclaim by their very existence the glory and goodness and love of God.

Something happened on that high and holy mountain, something profound and transforming, yet Peter's first reaction was to shut it down, to seal it up. Let's build some dwellings, put up some tents and domesticate this wild event, Peter is perhaps really saying. But you can't domesticate, encase, control the living God. Tell me your name, Moses asked of the divine, and God replied *I am who I am*. God will not be limited by our limitations.

Sometimes we have mystical, mysterious, sacred experiences and we are afraid to talk about them, for fear of being misunderstood or written off. William Willimon talks about asking a person why she had the occupation she had. The person responded by saying she saw a bumper sticker on a car and knew that she should be an elementary school teacher. He was amazed, but for her, that was a real experience of God speaking to her. How often might God be trying to speak to us, and how quick or slow are we to listen?

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Polish born American rabbi who lived from 1907 to 1972 said: *"Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."*

Recently we heard of the death of Captain Sir Tom Moore, who at age 100 profoundly moved and motivated all who have heard his story. His was a simple challenge. For his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday he wanted to raise a thousand pounds for Britain's National Health Service by walking a hundred laps in his garden. So his family set up a fundraising page for people to make contributions. By the time of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, he had raised thirty million pounds. His story, his attitude and example, raised the spirits of the British nation in the midst of pandemic in profound ways, right when such hope was

most needed. Many of us have seen on YouTube the recording of "You'll Never Walk Alone" he made with the National Health Service Voices and Michael Ball, a song so full of optimism and promise. As the BBC said of him, Sir Tom was the right man at the right time. His straightforward approach to life was summed up in an interview he gave when he said: *"The way I've always looked at it; tomorrow will be a good day."* Just chance or does God work through ordinary people in extraordinary ways, and at the right time?

At the heart of the Transfiguration, at the heart of the Christian story, the Christian life, is love, God's love for us shown in Jesus Christ, a love that is as close and intimate as the touch of a hand and as warm as a smile, a love that never gives up and never lets us go.

In her book *The Bible and the New York Times*, Fleming Rutledge quotes a letter written by a doctor, who describes the holy in the midst of the ordinary.

*"Today I visited an 8-year-old girl dying of cancer. Her body was disfigured by her disease and its treatment. She was in almost constant pain. As I entered her room, I was overcome almost immediately by her suffering-so unjust, unfair, unreasonable. Even more overpowering however was the presence of her grandmother lying in bed beside her with her huge body embracing this precious, inhuman suffering.*

*I stood in awe, for I knew I was on holy ground...The suffering of innocent children is horrifying beyond words. I will never forget the great, gentle arms and body of this grandmother. She never spoke a word while I was there. She was holding and participating in suffering that she could not relieve, and somehow her silent presence was relieving it. No words could express the magnitude of her love."*

Love cannot stay on the mountaintop. It must come down. Love must go where it is most needed. Amen.