

“Transfiguration”
Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21;
Matthew 17:1-9

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Some of you know that I just recently got back from a trip to Nicaragua. As you begin to think of going on such a trip, you begin to wonder about what it would be like. You might read the State Department website and see a lot of the warnings that they give. You might know that in 2018 there were some real issues there. So, you don't go without some sense of trepidation from some of those things. But any time you go somewhere that's new or different, there is some trepidation simply because you don't know what you're going to find, what exactly is going to be there.

It's easy for someone to tell you about a place, but until you have actually gone and been somewhere, there's a bit of wonder about what it really is like. There's always a sense that this other place is where other people live, and it's kind of this “other” out there of some sort. However, when you actually take the step to go and visit, and begin to interact and share time with people, you begin to find that you engage with some wonderful people.

In Nicaragua, I met Harold and Juan Carlos, who became friends and guides for me in the time that I was there. They are incredible gentlemen who are doing wonderful work. There was a way in which I felt a particular transformation. I learned something new. These folks weren't just names that I heard. They are people that I met. There was a lot to see and to do. I recognized the differences and the similarities and the wonder of being able to be with people in their own situation.

Then you come home. It's kind of like going down the mountain. You wonder where that journey is going to take you and what's next. How have my perspectives changed? How do I see things differently? Because certainly you can't go through an experience without it having some effect on you, some change.

I was thinking about that in relationship to the disciples as they were walking with Jesus. Perhaps at the beginning there was real excitement in following Jesus, of getting to be a disciple of the rabbi and following him. As they did that, they walked those dusty roads, heard him teaching over and over again, and saw him healing. They recognized him as a rabbi. In some ways we have been doing the same thing. We have been walking through some of the Sermon on the Mount, and hearing Jesus' teaching and what he has to help us understand and see.

Then they go up the mountain with him. All of a sudden, they see things a little differently. They wonder at what's going on – at least I get the sense that they do. I certainly would if I saw Jesus transfigured like that before me, and saw Moses and Elijah show up. I don't know what I would do, actually. But we know what Peter did. He said, “Can I build these booths for you? Can I build these tents?”

Now, there's always a lot of speculation as to why Peter said that. There's a festival of tents, so maybe he's thinking about that and how there's some intersection between God and humankind in that festival as they set up those tents for God. So maybe he was thinking that would be the proper thing to do. That's what his story tells him to do. Maybe he was just thinking, "Is there a way to contain this light? It's overpowering." Who knows? The thing is, he certainly had a response to what was going on with Jesus. I suspect it came out of his own story, his own way of understanding what was appropriate in that circumstance. When encountering the transcendent, encountering wonder, how do I make sense of it? How do I try to fit it into my life?

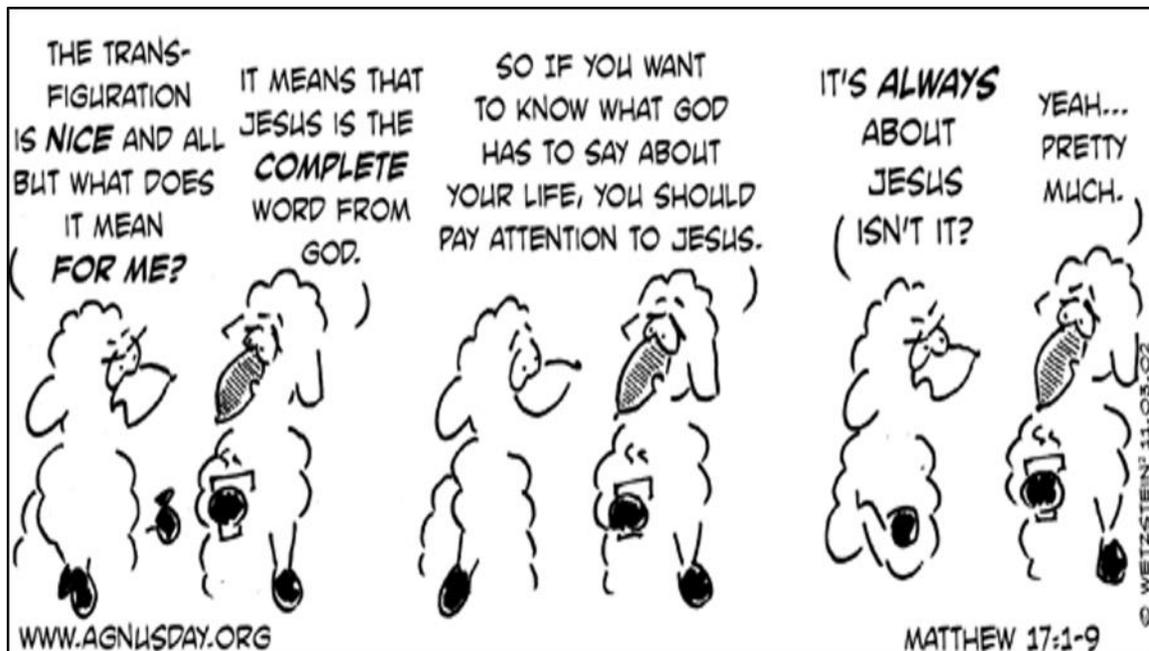
I think about that because we all come with our own stories. We have stories that we sometimes think about as a way to shape our lives. While we were in a poor community in Nicaragua, at a clinic that was serving that community, one of the things they said they were doing is to try to convince some of the young girls to realize that getting pregnant to get out of the family was probably not the best route. A young girl feeling trapped at home was seeing pregnancy as a way out. That was a story that she was hearing and thinking about. We've all created our own stories about how we think things should go or what will happen if I just do this. That was her story. It's not a different story, really, than we've seen in our own country sometimes when people in poverty want a way out.

We live with a lot of different stories that we shape our lives around. There's a story that we live with that if we just work hard, everything will work out. There is a lot of evidence today that it's not always the case for everyone. Some of our service workers work really hard, and hardly make it. They are not getting ahead the way the story says they should if they just work hard.

I think about my own story and the way that I thought education was all I needed to make it through life. I realized that was only a partial story, not a complete one. We can each think about our own stories. What are the stories in our lives that might lead us to interpret what Jesus is doing? Peter came with his own. We come with our own. How do we interpret the transfiguration? Is it just a vision? Did it really happen? There are all kinds of ways we struggle with that story. As we come with our own stories, we hear Peter acting out from his own story.

Sometimes when I read scripture, I see something I feel like I never saw before. The thing that astounded me as I read through it this time was that while Peter was talking, the cloud overshadowed and it feels like God interrupted him and said, "Hang on. Think about this: Jesus is my son, the beloved." If that's not enough, God goes on to say, "Listen to him." There are a couple of things that are incredibly interesting to me. They are a little awe producing. One is that God showed up. Maybe I need God to interrupt some of my stories sometimes, the way I react to things, as well. Maybe I should listen a little more sometimes so that I hear God's interruption, God speaking into my life.

It's awfully easy in the midst of everything to not be too unlike these sheep:



It's so easy to make it about me and not let it be about Jesus. I need God's interruption. I need the way God reminds me that it's not always about me and that it is about Jesus. It is about Jesus because Jesus brings to us the very grace of God, the love of God. He wants to change our lives.

There are two ways to react to thinking that God might interrupt. One way would be to ignore it, which is a way that is all too easy to do today, to not hear God's interruption, to not see that transfigurations of our lives. Or at least not to think they are really anything because they don't fit into our stories. The other is to be afraid. To wonder at what's happening and why it might be happening. It's so out of my experience, so different from my story, that I don't know what to make of it and I can be afraid.

It is again to hear how Jesus reaches out and touches his disciples and says, "Do not be afraid. Come with me. Let's go back down the mountain together." The question I have as they head back down the mountain is what's happening with their stories. So often I live my whole life from my stories. It feels like as they encounter Jesus in this way, recognizing that he is in some way the glory of God shining forth in their lives, that they are invited to recognize that it is his story that will really define their story in a way that will lead to life and grace and hope. It's that reflection that reminded me that it's Jesus' story, the way he enters into our lives and shows us the way, that is so important.

I think some of you may think I'm a little crazy, but I was reading a book on complex systems on my way home. One of the interesting things in there was that it seems to be, in the complex system our society is and the way we get along together, that oftentimes the way people interact can tend toward the negative. We can end up going

places that aren't so good. I shouldn't have been surprised at that. Paul says it in a different way: the wages of sin are death. Where we focus our lives, and the goals we set, and whether we hit those goals matter.

As I put this in the context of Jesus and Jesus' story, and his inviting us to see new ways, and to see him as God's son, and to allow him and his story to begin to define my life, it is an invitation to realize that it's not just letting things happen in my life. I have to have an intention. Why does God say, "Listen to him"? So that we can hear a nice story and not do anything about it? It's because we use our intentions, we use our choices, we use the way we live our lives to be something and to do something. It is as we look at Jesus' story, as we recognize him as the son of God come to us to teach us and guide us, as we follow his way, he leads us into the fullness of life and to life everlasting. He's inviting us to use our intentions.

The first intention that he asks his disciples to do is so counterintuitive to me. If something that wonderful had just happened to me, I would want to talk to all kinds of people about it. But he invites them to wait until his resurrection. You see, we have this whole story of Jesus, his whole life. In some ways this idea of transfiguration is of him changing into the one who can show us the new way, the new creation, the new world. In some ways, that's exactly what happens. It feels like the whole of history pivots around this event of Jesus' life. From then on societies have had to try to figure out what they are like and who they are in relationship to what he taught. We continue to try to figure that out. We haven't always done a great job, and we still struggle with it.

As Second Peter reminds us, we are invited in some ways to let go of all of our own stories and let the shining light of Jesus' story lead us, illuminate our lives. There's that poetic phrase about letting him illuminate our lives so that the morning star rises in our hearts, so that we can see that the day is coming. It is a description of hope that comes through the grace of God, coming to us and beginning to show us the way. We won't be able to do it on our own. God is with us and we're not on our own.

We can see that there is much more to Jesus than a teacher and a healer, and that he is God come among us to guide us, and to love us, and to lead us down the mountain into the valley, into our lives and into life together. Amen.