

Up and down – the story of our lives
A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
by Carol Penner
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Texts: Mark 9:1-13, 2 Peter 1:16-19

Today our scripture passage is about a high point. Literally a high point, because it takes place on a mountain. But a high point because it is a spiritual experience that is out of the ordinary. It's a high point that has a special name. The verses from Mark say that once Jesus was on the mountain with Peter James and John, he was transfigured before them. That means his appearance changed, and in fact his clothes started glowing. And so this event has been called "The Transfiguration".

Transfigure is a funny word. We don't use that word hardly at all in normal everyday language (although if you read Harry Potter books, you know what it means). The original Greek word is "metamorphis", which actually is a word in the English language that we use way more often than transfigure. Because everyone has studied frogs or butterflies at some point in your schooling, and you know that metamorphosis means to change appearance. A tadpole and a frog are still the same creature, but they look very different.

Today's story is about metamorphosis...something is happening in this story that is very important. The disciples go up the mountain with Jesus, just Peter, James and John. And they have a spiritual experience. People who are dead, or at least who lived long ago, are suddenly there talking to Jesus. And it's not just anybody, it's Moses and Elijah, two great prophets in Israel's history. There is also a dramatic change in Jesus' appearance and the disciples are terrified. And to top everything off, there is also a voice from heaven, "This is my beloved son, listen to him!" It's almost the same words that Jesus heard when he was baptized, but this time the words are directed to the disciples. And they are told to "Listen to him."

I wonder why this spiritual experience happens here, at this point in time. Do you remember what has just happened? If you remember our text from last week in Mark Chapter 8, Jesus has just told the disciples that he must suffer and die. The disciples, or at least Peter, have a very negative reaction to this statement, the biggest negative reaction to anything that Jesus ever says. The disciples didn't understand this whole

suffering business at all, they disagreed with Jesus about this. It's no coincidence, I think, that right after Peter disagrees with Jesus we get a voice from God on the mountain saying to the disciples, "Listen to him." There wasn't a voice from heaven after Jesus said the beatitudes, or after Jesus told them to love one another. The disciples might not have fully understood everything Jesus told them, but there is only one time when they totally outright disagree with him. And that is over the issue of Jesus having to suffer and die. And that's when the confirmation comes from God. If the disciples had any doubts about whether Jesus was the Messiah, the presence of Moses and Elijah would certainly help them to figure it out, as well as Jesus' transfiguration and the voice from heaven.

That might explain the timing of this experience for the disciples, but what about Jesus? This amazing experience, this once in a lifetime experience happens here, it happens now. Just after Jesus has been at Caesarea Philippi, just after he begins to speak about his suffering and death. From Caesarea Philippi on, Jesus is consciously carrying his cross, and he is telling his disciples they must do the same thing.

How might this experience have affected Jesus? I wonder if Jesus was wondering how he was going to do this. How would he go through with this suffering and crucifixion? Would he be able to endure the coming weeks knowing that a cross awaited him? The fear of torture is a torture in itself.

We are told in this gospel that "Elijah with Moses were talking with Jesus." I'm not the only person who has wondered what they were talking about. Someone must have asked Jesus at some point, because in the gospel of Matthew we get a brief hint of that conversation. That gospel says, "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem."

Sometimes we don't give a thought to Jesus' mental state as he walked this road to Jerusalem. We think, "He's our Saviour, he chose this, he was fine with it." Was he? We know for sure that he was filled with agony in the garden. Was he entirely peaceful about his identity all the other hours and days of his short life? Think about your own life, when there is something that you dread in the future, do you save all the worry and anxiety up for one night? Or do you carry it all for days and months? Perhaps the transfiguration was an encouragement for Jesus himself

God sends Moses and Elijah to talk to Jesus. Now Moses and Elijah are associated with mountaintop experiences. Moses met God on a mountain, when he first saw the burning bush, and again much later when he went up Mt. Sinai. Elijah met God on the mountain too, not in the thunder or the wind, but in the silence. But more to the point, both Moses and Elijah knew what it was like to be afraid for their lives. Moses had a whole army of Pharaoh's soldiers chasing him. Elijah fled from King Ahab. Both of them faced persecution for doing God's will.

When we go up on a mountain, one of the things we do it for is because it gives us the big picture. We can see the land spread out before us. I wonder whether this wasn't true of the transfiguration as well. Jesus up on the mountain, having the larger picture of God's work in history spread out before him, with Moses and Elijah as narrators. Maybe this helped strengthen Jesus' resolve, maybe this helped to give him courage.

Today when you were sitting preparing yourself for worship, we showed pictures that artists have made of this passage of scripture, the transfiguration. Of course there are lots of ways that people have interpreted this story artistically. And maybe you found it interesting to look at the depiction of the characters or the way they portrayed Jesus.

But I had another reason for showing those pictures this morning. Most of those pictures were from the walls or windows of churches. The transfiguration is a very popular subject for illustrating Jesus' life, a very popular image to encourage people as they worship. Why is that?

I liked the one picture, perhaps you recall it, where the centre panel is the transfiguration, and the side panels are pictures of people in their frilly collars, intently looking at what is happening.



Maybe you had a reaction to that saying, "Those people weren't there when that happened!" It's not supposed to be like a photograph of the event, it's trying to get the bigger picture. It's a pictorial representation of what we do when we read the bible, of what we are doing today. We gaze at this story of the transfiguration. We ask, "What did it mean for Jesus? What did it mean for the disciples? What does it mean for us?"

As people have thought about this story of the transfiguration, they have reflected on the fact that it's a story that looks back and looks forward. There are echoes of Jesus' baptism on the mountain, because the words that God says here are similar to the words that God said at Jesus' baptism. So it's a glance back at the very beginning of the ministry. And yet Elijah and Moses are talking about Jesus' departure...they are looking ahead and seeing his death on the cross. And the disciples, they see Jesus glowing like the sun, they see him talking with people who are with God...it's a look ahead to Jesus coming in power. You climb up the mountain and you can see a long way, forwards and backwards.

Now we don't have a picture of the transfiguration painted on the front wall of our church. Lendrum is different than a lot of Mennonite churches because we actually have some religious art on the walls. Whether we pay attention to it or not is another story. Has the fact that the lion and the lamb are laying down together been percolating in your imagination? Because you have this artwork here, do you think about God's kingdom coming, do you think about the fulfillment of time that God is bringing about, the reconciliation of the hunter and the hunted? Maybe you do, maybe you don't. I think it's a good theme to have on the wall. But Mennonites have had 500 years of empty walls, so don't feel bad if you think of what's on the wall as simple decoration, and you've never really thought of the meaning of it before.

But for the majority of Christians, for the majority of history, what is on the wall in the church was something that was there for a reason. It was there to strengthen and deepen our faith.

Just imagine if on the wall in front of us we had some amazing piece of art about the transfiguration. And every Sunday of your life, you came here and the picture of Jesus at that moment in his life was presented to you. How would this story change your life?

The story of Jesus' transfiguration would be up there when we have a baptism...it would be the backdrop of baptism. Would we hear the echoes of God's voice, "This is my son, in whom I am well pleased". As we visit in the church with our friends...we would see this scene, and we would remember that Jesus was with his friends on the mountain, they experienced this together. We come to church bowed down with anxiety, maybe there has just been a diagnosis, or we are walking with someone through a very painful time. We look at Moses and Elijah and Jesus talking, we wish we could join their conversation. What is the big picture in my life? Jesus was given courage to face what he needs to face, how is God offering me courage? The transfiguration would be front and centre as we come to bury our loved ones. Seeing the light of Jesus, makes us wonder, is this what our loved one saw as they reached the gates of death. Was Jesus waiting for them, are they with Elijah and Moses now?

Transfiguration and the story of our lives. Metamorphosis...how are we changed? How can this story help us?

One thing we do know is that Peter was transfigured, he was "metamorphosed". It wasn't in the twinkling of an eye...it took some time. The writer tells us that Peter and the other disciples were terrified. We also know that Peter says something pretty stupid, or at least it seems stupid, we don't know why he says that he wants to build shelters for each of them. I have heard various commentators trying to make sense of this comment. Saying that Peter was actually referring to the festival of booths, which involves building places of worship, or they suggest that Peter was expressing his desire never to go down from the mountain but to stay there. We don't know what Peter was thinking, but we see from the story that Jesus just basically ignores what Peter is saying, because he has missed the mark.

Peter is having a mountaintop experience. He's gone up and seen something very few people have ever seen. He was terrified, he says the wrong thing. But he didn't understand what had happened. He trudges down the mountain, wondering, what was that about. Jesus wisely tells the disciples not to talk about what they've seen. They don't understand what it was about. Not yet.

But the penny drops. They do eventually find meaning in this story. They didn't attend a church every Sunday where there was a painting of this story at the front that they looked at every week. They didn't need that. Because Jesus' glowing figure was imprinted on their retinas, it was indelibly etched in their minds. They would see Jesus on the cross, and they would have the transfiguration in the background. They would see Jesus in the upper room, and they are trying to put that together with the scene on the mountain. And they would see the birth of the church, the death of Stephen...and in the background always is Jesus transfigured on the mountain with Moses and Elijah, the voice of God continually saying, "This is my beloved son, Listen to him!"

Going to the mountaintop with Jesus eventually bears fruit in Peter's life. The writings in the letters of Peter reflect the thoughts of this disciple. As you listen to this, contrast this to Peter's blurting out words in today's gospel reading. This is very different. Listen to this voice from 2 Peter 1:16-19.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

There has been a metamorphosis here. From someone babbling about building, to someone who understands that there is a difference between seeing a light, and having the morning star rising in your heart. What a deep and wise reflection that is on the spiritual life, on our spiritual journey. Peter has been changed. Transfigured. Metamorphosis has happened.

What about us? What about the story of our lives? I think it's important that at the beginning of Lent, as we start to move with Jesus towards his death, that we have this story of the transfiguration in our mind. It can shape us and change us.

We come to church, longing to be changed. Many people want worship to be a life-changing experience, "I want a fantastic worship experience." We want to see the light of God blazing like the sun. (But all we get is the new light bulbs that Ralph and George installed....)

Transfiguration moments are few and far between in our lives, I think. Maybe we each get one, maybe you aren't even sure if you have had any. A moment where you get the big picture of your life, "Ah...this is what life is about, this is how God is working in my life, this is how much God loves me...this is what I am called to do". Some mystical experience, some startling moment of clarity. Or maybe not. Maybe you've had a strange experience, something spiritual happened, and you aren't even sure what it was. Maybe most of the time we are face down, terrified, with a close up view of the mud. There's some light around here, but we don't really know what it's all about. I have felt that way, that I can't contain even a fraction of what is out there right at the end of my nose...it's too much for me.

I think one of the purposes of coming to worship is to make sure we keep mulling things over. Chewing the cud of some light filled moment. Working on the meaning of our lives, working on this meaning in the light of Jesus and his words. Jesus had the moment of light at this baptism where he heard a voice from heaven, and then a few years later, he has this brief interlude on the mountain. But other than that it was years in the carpentry shop, years of walking dusty roads, meeting sick and confused people, and having to face a lot of persecution.

This week I invite you to keep the picture of the transfiguration in your mind. Transfiguration, metamorphosis, is part of God's plan for your life. You may have seen the light, but that is not all that God offers. Join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Pick up your own cross, and the hope that the morning star will dawn in our hearts.