

“Changed by the Light”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Transfiguration Sunday – February 10, 2013

Luke 9: 28-36

Guess what I’ve been doing this week? If you took a peek in the Fellowship Hall, you’ll see that the number of boxes have decreased from last Sunday. While all the work from the office renovation was completed in swift manner within one week, the unpacking of all our stuff is taking a little longer!

Each day this week, I tried to work through about five boxes of my stuff: books, files, binders, magazines, knick-knacks, tools, hardware, and the like. It felt a little overwhelming at first, but by Thursday I felt like I was nearing the finish line of this marathon. I literally have gone through everything which was in my office, and I can tell you I found some pretty interesting stuff. Want to see? This will be like show-and-tell in school.

I found my acceptance letter to Davidson College. I found the obituary from the front page of the Vicksburg, Mississippi, newspaper for my grandfather, Rev. Bill Mansell. I found my high school and college class rings, as well as my fraternity pins. I found the keys to the 1985 Subaru and 1971 Volkswagen Beetle which our family had when I was in high school and college. My parents are looking at me right now thinking, “We asked you for those keys twenty years ago and NOW you find them?”

I also found lots of pictures – and many of you are in them! I found pictures from ten years ago when we came to “candidate” at John Knox. I found a picture which Amy Winton had taken of me and Erin dancing at a wedding, when Erin was five years old. I found pictures of Crop Walks, and youth events, and Prime Timers luncheons, and work going on around the church. They brought back a lot of wonderful memories.

I can say for myself that it has been cathartic and freeing to make at least three trips to the dumpster and five trips to the paper recycling bin. I am able to let go of papers and books which I either no longer use, or now have access to materials via the internet. The purging which I’ve done not only allows for more physical space where I work, but also more emotional space. That’s because I’ve cleaned out the things which I no longer need, but can hold onto the memories of the distant or recent past through specific objects, or just in my memories.

This experience has also been a stark reminder that time marches on, and things indeed change. Seeing names and faces of people who are no longer with us; reading notes about decisions made five, ten, twenty years ago; looking through the names of couples I’ve married, men and women for whom I have conducted their funerals, young women and men who have been confirmed as active members of the church – all of these are stark reminders to me that the church is not the same as it was thirty, ten, even one year ago.

Sometimes it takes an event like moving, or renovating, or even a death in the family, to cause us to shine a bright light on what has become routine and comfortable, and see how things have changed and will change. Sometimes it takes a bright light of transformation to show us where we have been, and where we are called to go. Sometimes we must be open to the changing light of God, for in its bright glare, we are reminded once again of our purpose as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our passage this morning is Luke's account of the transfiguration of Jesus. Donald Luther describes the transfiguration as a great mystery. *And mystery is alluring; it draws us in at that same time that it always just eludes our full comprehension. The transfiguration of Jesus is such a story, but one that has much to say, nevertheless, about the divinity and glory of Jesus, his (pending) death and resurrection, his relationship with the law and the prophets of Israel, as well as the way in which contemporary readers of this text are to live their lives, here and now, transfigured* (Lori Brandt Hale, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 452).

As you look at this story from Luke, there are a couple of key things to note. One is that this story is truly a turning point in the Gospel of Luke. Prior to this you have Jesus teaching and healing the people, feeding the five thousand, and calling his disciples. After this story, Jesus sets his eyes on Jerusalem, and the remainder of Luke is the story of his traveling this road to his death and resurrection. It's almost as if after the transfiguration Jesus follows his calling God has set before him: to be the Savior of the world.

A second key to this story is how it mirrors that of Jesus' baptism. In these two narratives from Jesus' life, we have God speaking directly to those gathered. When Jesus is baptized, the Lord says to Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). After Jesus meets Elijah and Moses on top of the mountain with James, John and Peter, the Lord says: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35). At his baptism, Jesus is blessed by God. At his transfiguration, Jesus is given authority by God, so that others might follow him.

Jesus appears not with two people of little importance from the past, but with Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's most prominent leaders. Luke says, "They appeared in glory," emphasizing that they are not of human form, but are from heaven above. And in their presence with Jesus, they make clear Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah has come.

This meeting is not solely for the purpose of having a "mountain-top experience." It is also a time of foreshadowing what awaits Jesus and the disciples in Jerusalem. Luke says that, "They appeared in glory and were speaking about (Jesus') departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31). The Greek word which is translated "departure" literally means "exodus," and figuratively refers to the passion which Jesus will suffer in the Holy City.

But you also get the impression that that will not be the end of the story. As soon as Peter blurts out his offer to build tents for all of them, "a

cloud came and overshadowed them” (9:34). And then, after the Lord speaks, the cloud dissipates just as quickly as it arrives. Past memories of Moses and Samuel and Elijah and others come flooding back into our consciousness, reaffirming that this is God in the midst of the cloud. Somehow, you begin to get the feeling that this story will have a different ending than others have had before it.

Following the transfiguration, Jesus and his disciples come down the mountain and they are met by a large crowd (Luke 9:37-43). A father approaches Jesus and pleads for him to heal his son of the spirit which possesses him. The man states that Jesus’ disciples could not cast out this spirit, and so he begs Jesus to look at his son. Jesus admonishes his disciples for not having more faith, and he heals the boy in front of them.

Lori Brandt Hale shares how this story which follows Jesus’ transfiguration inspired Heidi Neumark, the pastor of Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the Bronx, New York. *The community was struggling, barely surviving, when Neumark arrived. Standing amid poverty and the myriad problems that can accompany such a demon – crime, drug abuse, lack of education and opportunity, lack of hope – Transfiguration mostly kept its doors shut tight to the world around it.*

The work of Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit was example enough for Neumark. “When Peter and the others came down from the mountain,” she writes, “they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty . . . But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.”

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus loses its power if it does not include that moment when Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain. The transfigured Jesus is changed, not in essence, but in the way he is seen; he acts in and for the world accordingly. Seeing Jesus differently means seeing oneself and others differently too. The congregation of Transfiguration Church understood: “But living high up in the rarefied air isn’t the point of transfiguration . . . [It was] never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level” (ibid, 456).

How do we see others differently through the light of Jesus’ transfiguration? How do we see ourselves differently through the light of Jesus’ transfiguration? Are we willing to come down from the mountain-top? Are we able to see our spiritual life and journey as something more than a private privilege? How will we be changed by the light of transfiguration?

One of the things I did this week in unpacking my office was to hang pictures back on the wall. But I took the advice of Sandy Jordan and did not put back into my office the large brown bookcase which had taken up one

entire wall. Instead, I reoriented my desk so that it faces the wall where that bookcase once stood. And in its place I hung my pictures, diplomas, and other framed items. But as I did this, I did so with intent and meaning behind how they are arranged.

They begin with my great-grandfather's college diploma from 1903. Next are three needlepoint pieces either given to my grandfather during his ministry, or made by him as a gift to me. Next are two awards given by Davidson College to my great-aunt and uncle for their service to the college and community during their lifetime. Next are my college and seminary diplomas, followed by my pictures from our time spent following seminary in Bossey, Switzerland, with 50 Christians from around the world. Next is a picture of the first church I served in as a student intern, followed by my ordination certificate from the Presbytery of West Virginia. Finally, there is the framed text of 2 Timothy 3:14-15, which was given to me by my father at my ordination, was given to my father at his ordination by my grandfather, and was given to my grandfather at his ordination by my great-grandfather.

These items represent my spiritual story, the foundation in which my ministry is rooted, and from which I draw much spiritual strength. They signify mountain-top experiences of my past, and how God has molded and shaped me throughout my life. Seeing them each day reminds me of God's presence from generation to generation.

And yet the wall behind my desk is blank. That is left for the future, for what is to come. I anticipate putting pictures there from our renewal time this year. I will place pictures there from our family's travels and experiences in the coming months. I will also place pictures there which you will share, pictures of your experiences during your time of renewal. In both, I will be reminded of God's continuing presence and guidance, not only in my past, but also in our hopeful present and future. And perhaps, for all of us, we will be reminded once again of the hopeful, transformative change which takes place through God's light in Jesus Christ.

Go and be transfigured by the light of Christ, as you walk the journey of faith God has laid out for you, today, tomorrow, and for all your days.

Thanks be to God. Amen.