

February 11, 2024 - The Transfiguration
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Let us pray:

O God,
You are the great mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.
You are also Jesus, who lived, died, and rose
to show us your love and bring us closer to you.
Keep us present to the signs in your world
That point us back to you.
May we never force our desire for answers
Over our search for you.
Give us the courage to inhabit
Moments of wonder and awe
To carry them with us
And allow them to speak their own truths,
Lead us deeper and deeper into relationship
with the God we follow up the mountain,
to the cross,
and beyond.

Our group that gathered for bible study this week
Reflected on just how *strange* the story of the transfiguration is.
We all wondered aloud about what the transfiguration *meant*,
And what actually happened.
We hear God declare Jesus his son and beloved,
but the experience was far more than a voice.
It involves blindingly white radiance, cameo appearances, and terror
On the mountaintop.
I imagine, for these disciples,
It involved seeing, hearing, feeling, *and* knowing.
And we only get glimmers of these details in Mark's telling.

We hear the story of the transfiguration
as we end this season after Epiphany.
Throughout Epiphany we've been retelling
and walking with stories about signs of God in our world.
Over the past few months,
I've gotten lots of practice at telling my *own* stories,
Some of them about signs,
Signs of - in the famous line of Gerard Manley Hopkins -
"a world charged with the grandeur of God."

My 2.5 year old, Francis
Has become obsessed with hearing stories.
We now have a collection of half a dozen stories
From our lives that we share with him when he needs his teeth brushed
Or help falling asleep at naptime.
He requests specific ones by name.

And one of these that I've found myself repeating
Over and over and over again
Is from 8 years ago,
On the first day
of my first ever backpacking trip.
My now-husband and I were in the Carter-Moriah range
of the White mountains.
We set out from the parking area
and within the first half hour, I was unsettled.
We had already taken a detour because of a washed out bridge
And done an unplanned river crossing.
We entered a marshy, boggy area.
It was quiet,
And we had to watch our footsteps,
Careful on old, dissolving wooden planks.
In a moment that felt truly outside of time,
A moose rose up out of the bog.
It must have been resting, laying down,
Heard us, and simply stood up in that same place.
But to us,
The moose was like an apparition
rising magically out of the mist!
Nathan and I stopped walking,
And the three of us simply stood looking at each other.
I yell-whispered to Nathan,
“We only talked about bears...what are we supposed to do about a moose?!???”
Nathan spoke in a loud but calm voice,
“Go ahead, lady moose. Go on to where you're going.”
She examined us for another few seconds
Before turning to face the opposite direction
And instantly galloping away.
The ground vibrated underneath our feet with her size

Until she was far away from us.

...It was an encounter that is still hard to put into words
That will never leave me.

When I'm telling Francis the story, I always end there...

But I don't want to.

I have the impulse to keep going -

To explain more, somehow,

To craft some definitive meaning

For this story

And therefore, a clear reason

For telling this story over and over again.

That *explains its power*.

I don't know what my "moose story" *means*.

But as I sit with my memories

And share the story over and over again with others,

I've unraveled some of the threads woven into it.

It was an encounter with an animal I had never seen before up close -

One so much larger and more powerful than me.

It was an experience in seeing,

In the awareness of myself as a small, vulnerable, creature.

It was an opportunity to practice being utterly surprised

In wonder and awe,

Being terrified, but not remaining in that fear.

An exercise in expectation -

that we might come across black bears on our trip -

And the reality of encounter.

Being surprised by the grace of stumbling into

such moments and such places,

Embracing the discomfort

of experiencing wonder and awe

Seeing into the deeper reality of things,

experiencing our lives

And "a world charged with the grandeur of God"

more fully.

I don't know what the transfiguration *means*.

But we - the christian community over space and time -

Have unraveled some of the threads together.

This one story, this one moment,

References the lives of Moses and Elijah -

Who also appear in this story as themselves.
 Moses and Elijah are both prophets
 who encountered Yahweh's epiphany on a mountain
 at a crucial moment of discernment in their calls from God
 Elijah has run away to a mountain
 but God meets him there,
 only to return him to the struggle.
 Moses's message on behalf of God
 was rejected the first time by the people
 and he has to go up the mountain a second time to try again.
 Giants from the disciples' spiritual *past*.
 The blindingly white garment might have evoked martyrdom
 For the community of Mark's first readers,
 who knew this reality firsthand...
 The faithful of the *present*.
 It also points to the resurrection -
 of the young man dressed in a white robe
 At the end of Mark's gospel
 Who tells the women witnesses that
 Jesus is no longer in his tomb...
 because he has been raised from the dead.
 What's coming in the *future* of the story
 Beyond this transfiguration moment.

When we step into this gospel,
 When we step into the perspective of Peter, James, and John,
 We witness the worlds of their future, past, and present woven together
 In Jesus.
 The Word through whom all things live and move and have their being,
 Whose identity is wrapped up
 in intimate relationship with God the Father.
 The disciples
 And we
 witness an experience of Jesus the Christ...
 Before the vision ends
 and they all must go back down the mountain.

After the transfiguration,
 Jesus begins his journey towards the cross.
 And We're about to transition to Lent this week,
 when we confront the ways we move away from God
 and from seeing Christ in each other
 and the world around us.

It is a liminal moment in Mark's gospel,
A moment bridging what-was and what-will-be.

We walk across the bridge of this gospel
As we also carry it with us:
This Sunday and this story
Standing in the space between
The glorious signs of Epiphany
And the quiet ashes of Lent.

As we carry this story,
We might not be able to figure out what
The transfiguration *means*.
Our task here might *not* be to figure it out.
The hope, instead, might be
That we unravel new layers of understanding
As we journey with the glimpses
of "transfiguration" moments in and of our own lives.
We can hold their importance
And their fundamental mystery at the same time.
Being surprised by the grace of God leading us into
such moments and such places,
Embracing the discomfort of experiencing wonder and awe
Seeing into the deeper reality of things,
experiencing our lives
And "a world charged with the grandeur of God"
more fully.
To stay with the stories,
To keep telling the stories that mystify us.