

“Illuminating Identity: Holding On and Letting Go”

*A sermon preached on Luke 9.28-43 by Emily Hull McGee
on March 3, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

As the story goes, Thomas Merton was in the middle of an impossibly ordinary day. Merton, a monk who had lived at his monastery for more than 15 years, happened to be running errands that day for the monastery, when everything changed for him at a crowded intersection right in the middle of downtown.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district,” Merton says, “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”¹

Reflecting on this pivotal moment in Merton’s life, his biographer William H. Shannon says that by the time of this experience in 1958, Merton

¹ <https://www.spiritualtravels.info/articles-2/north-america/kentucky-a-thomas-merton-tour/thomas-mertons-mystical-vision-in-louisville/>

had become a very different kind of monk than when he entered the monastery in 1941. “One of the things going on in him was the maturing realization, born of this contemplation, that it is not possible to leave the world in any real sense,” Shannon writes. “There is simply no place else to go...The experience challenged the concept of a separate ‘holy’ existence lived in a monastery. He experienced the glorious destiny that comes simply from being a human person and from being united with, not separated from, the rest of the human race.”²

I know that intersection, there in downtown Louisville, and I tell you — it’s really not all that special. Tall buildings, cars whizzing by, people hurrying to and from work. And yet, right there in the midst of the ordinary was a sacred, holy moment that left Merton and thousands more who have read his words and recognized a bit of their own experience in them, transformed.

II.

As we’ve talked about this morning in worship, today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day we look not to the people on the streets of Louisville shining like suns but rather at Jesus, in this dazzling array that speaks of his identity, his divine nature, his mission and calling; of our own identities and all that shapes them; and of this intersection where human and divine meet.

For many, this account we call ‘transfiguration’ is among the oddest in scripture — confusing, confounding, and unclear as to what we are to learn — so let’s unpack it a bit. Just before the story begins, we hear from Jesus, revealing to his disciples the hardest truth they won’t understand, that one day, “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the

² Ibid.

religious and political authorities, be killed, and on the third day, be raised.”³ And then he sketches out what the life of discipleship is to be, a life of denying oneself, of taking up the cross, of losing lives in order to save them.

Then “eight days later,” Luke tells us, signaling for the reader this allusion to the Lord’s Day, the day after the cycle of seven, the day of resurrection — Jesus went away to pray. This is not unusual for Luke’s story of Jesus — he is often found praying alone — but this time, Jesus takes a few with him: Peter, James, and John. The text tells us that the three disciples were sleepy, and here, we who know the eventual story of that hardest truth, the story of Jesus’s last days, of the time away in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus’s disciples succumbed to sleep — we should be noting that connection.

But atop this mountain, they were blinded with a sight so extraordinary and confounding — Jesus, glowing and sparkling in white as he’ll be soon, standing in another garden “early in the morning when it was still dark.” With him were Moses and Elijah, the two who from Jewish tradition would represent the law and the prophets. Together, the three spoke of Jesus departure — his exodus — the work he was preparing to do on a cross in Jerusalem. You can just imagine the faces of Peter, James, and John — rubbing their eyes, stunned into silence, not sure if they were asleep or awake, alive or dead, here or there, in this holy in-between where heaven seemed to touch the earth. But as the three began to leave, Peter, desperate to grab hold and hang on to this vision he was experiencing, suggested hurriedly to

³ Luke 9:21-22.

build a dwelling, a place for all three. “Master, it’s good for us to be here,” Peter says, “so let me find a way to keep things as they are!”

With that, a cloud overshadowed them to the disciples terror. A voice rang out, just as it did at Jesus’s baptism not long before: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And ending as quickly as it began, Moses and Elijah vanished; Jesus stood alone and normal; the disciples again stunned into silence, for they told no one of what they had seen.

The story continues down in the valley — one holy experience to another, as Jesus and the disciples encounter a great crowd and an urgent request from a father about his son, held captive by an unclean spirit. “Heal him,” the father begs of the disciples, but where they cannot, Jesus can. Calling forth the spirit to leave the boy, the young one is healed and returned to his father, well and whole. For it seems that there were beloved sons on the mountain and down in the valley!⁴ And as if to bookend the whole experience, Jesus says again to his disciples, practically coaxing them into the realization that what they hold onto, they’ll soon need to let go: “let these words sink into your ears,” Jesus tells them, “the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.”

III.

The story of Jesus’s transfiguration — the glory on the mountain and the descent into the suffering of the valley — is one that Christians everywhere return to every year, falling as it does on the final Sunday of the season of Epiphany. In many ways, it is a hinge Sunday — connecting Epiphany’s revealing of Jesus from manger to mountaintop to Lent’s final

⁴ With thanks to Debie Thomas for her stirring essay and this beautiful image on this text in Journey With Jesus, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2100-lights-and-shadows>

journey of Jesus from wilderness to a wide, empty tomb. The story of transfiguration represents for us that passageway, where one realm meets the next — heaven and earth, mountain and valley, revealing and hiding, holding on and letting go.

It seems the God we know through scripture seems to lean into such holy ground — where, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, there are “cracked doors between this world and some other, brighter place where God is no absentee landlord but a very palpable presence.”⁵ When we peek behind those doors, that’s when we see along with Moses a bush set aflame, we glimpse with Jacob a ladder descending from the heavens above, we find refuge with Elijah with the sound of God’s still, small voice ringing in our ears.

I’ve shared with you before how the Celtic Christians called these the ‘thin places,’ fluid passageways where the distance between this world and the next shrinks to nothing. Sometimes those thin places in our lives are experiences so holy, we’re sure the presence of the Lord is right here among us: the birth of a new baby or the first leap of a puppy in your lap, the hours spent in creation where the whole world seems to have come alive with God’s glory, the time with friends and family so full of love you’re sure your heart will burst right into, the music that brings you to life, the warm spring day at the end of a long cold winter that finally, finally makes us feel that we’re going to be alright. They’re ones we want, like Peter, to capture and contain, emotional or spiritual spaces to situate these experiences, arrange them, study them, define them, and return again and again to them, storing up for ourselves these treasures for the sure seasons of suffering to come. We

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Thin Places,” *Home By Another Way*, p58.

struggle to name these experiences or even speak of them, but somehow we know intuitively that they have taken us to the mountaintop.

But part of the reason we recognize such experiences as high and holy, sacred and extraordinary, is because we've had seasons so low and devastating to put up against them: seasons where we've had to watch a loved one slip away, seasons of addiction where the bottle / the job / the pills / the phone have had an airtight grip on our lives, seasons of struggle and loneliness where we just weren't sure how to make it through the next day.

This year, though, as I read the familiar account of transfiguration in light of our exploration of identity. And while I see the high mountaintop experience as surely a thin place, I see also the time in the valley as a thin place too. I can't help but to think about all the transforming moments or seasons of our lives which define our sense of identity — precisely because they hinge from one to the next, connecting what has been to what will be, the high to the low, the mountain to the valley, sometimes even in dizzying, dissonant ways. You know the seasons I'm talking about — receiving word of a new job and a new diagnosis in a matter of days; discovering a new love and in turn, discovering yourself; finally getting an answer to a long-standing question only to find that ten more questions follow in its wake; making a decision about that opportunity, that big idea, that change you've put off and then seeing all the ways it's been waiting for you along the way.

Artist and poet Jan Richardson speaks of this transition from mountain to valley, this in-between time from holy to ordinary, saying this: "Like Peter, John, and James at prayer with Jesus on the mountain, I sometimes struggle

to stay awake when it's easier to be lulled into sleep and to miss the thin places, the meetings of heaven and earth, that open up in the midst of daily life. And when those thin places come—when a burst of inspiration opens a new world, say, or, after hours or months or sometimes years of experimentation, something finally comes together at the drafting table, and both the work and I myself are transformed—it can be tempting to want to set up shop there, to preserve the moment, as Peter longed to do. I recognize his impulse in my own self, his desire to want to linger in the wonder. And why shouldn't he? Yet the persistent invitation of Jesus is to take what we have seen, what we have found, down into the trenches of everyday life... we need to keep practicing that transition, to keep rehearsing the journey that moves us from being recipients of wonder to becoming people who, transformed and—shall we say it?—transfigured by what we have received, can then offer these wonders to a broken world.”⁶

IV.

Friends, that is the invitation set before us today and everyday — an invitation and calling to step into. The same God who revealed in Jesus the thin place between heaven and earth — thin in incarnation, baptism, transfiguration, death, and resurrection — is the same God who journeys with us atop mountains, in the valleys, and every step between the two of our lives. Our call is to behold, to see, to listen, to awaken ourselves to the truth that Merton reminds us: ‘for we are all walking around shining like the sun.’

V.

⁶ Jan Richardson, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/02/07/transfiguration-back-to-the-drawing-board/>

Jan Richardson wrote a beautiful blessing for Transfiguration Sunday,
so hear these words now as blessing to you.

Dazzling: A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday

Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.
We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home.
We could stay.
But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.
This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.
It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.
It is not shy.
It is not afraid.
It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray

until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,
when it will shine forth
with all that it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light
you have carried
all this way.⁷

⁷ Jan Richardson, "Dazzling: A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday," *Circle of Grace*, p83-84.