Transfigured or Transformed?
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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II Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent begins. On Transfiguration Sunday the Gospel lesson for the day always focuses on Jesus taking a small group of disciples with him up a mountain where they have an amazing experience. I want to begin with the gospel lesson today and I'll let the text do the talking. Listen now for God's word to us:

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.' Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.' While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Our second lesson is from the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth. Here Paul references Moses coming down from Mount Sinai after having received the tablets of the law from God. The story goes that he wore a veil because his face was glowing with the fading glory of his encounter with God. Listen now for echoes of the Transfiguration Story:

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word;
but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

From Monday afternoon through Wednesday at noontime, Judith and I attended a presbytery retreat with other clergy and educators (including Susan Graceson and Diane Hutchins) from National Capital Presbytery. We were particularly anxious to get the chance to visit with two pastors in the presbytery who had each, like us, walked the Camino de Santiago this past summer. They were a few weeks ahead of us. We followed their progress on Facebook at the time and they followed ours, but this was the first time we have had a real chance to visit since our separate adventures on the Camino. I suspect that is because when we returned to our respective parishes, we all four hit the ground running, which is probably why the other pastors at the retreat all asked us the same question: “Did the sabbatical have a lasting impact on your sense of well-being and your practice of life and ministry or does it all seem like a really long time ago now?”

It’s a great question to ponder on a Sunday when we hear again the story of Peter and James and John traveling with Jesus up a mountain and wonder about the enduring significance of what happened that day.

It occurs to me that there is a difference between being transfigured and being transformed. The way I see it, a transfiguration is a momentary or transitory change of outward appearance. The appearance of your face changes for a while, you have a glow that comes when you are deep in romantic love or you are gazing at the new little baby that you’ve just brought home from the hospital. You have that look that tells people you are pregnant even before you have a baby bump. You bask in the glory of your favorite team winning the big game. You have a smile that you just can’t wipe off your face on your wedding day or when you ace the test or get the promotion. That’s transfiguration.

When I think of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain top, I think of it in a similar transitory way. The disciples were seeing it as if in a vision. All of the sudden, Luke says, Jesus was glowing. His face changed appearance, his clothes became dazzling white, two men, Moses and Elijah appeared on either side of him as if to show that he was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Now this change in his appearance was not necessarily for Jesus’ benefit, but for the disciples. It was meant to show them something important about Jesus’ identity—which is why a voice came from heaven saying, “This is my son, my chosen, listen to him.” It was all so spectacular, such an incredible experience, that Peter wanted to stay with it—to memorialize it in some way, to set up dwelling places for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. If he’d had a cellphone, he would have taken a selfie and posted it to his Instagram account and shared it on Facebook.

Most of our mountaintop experiences, if we’ve had them, are a little less dramatic than all of that. We may not understand them as encounters with God, exactly, but we have all certainly had some high points in our lives—times when we might like to have frozen time, when everything seemed to be in sync, clicking, when you might say that God was in God’s heaven, and we were in the flow, and all seemed right with the world. They are what a previous generation would have called Kodak moments—and I certainly had several of them last summer. But the truth is, the moments themselves don’t last. Life is just not like that. And if it were, we wouldn’t appreciate the high points as much when they come along.

When I came back from the Camino, the appearance of my face had changed in a very physical way—I had a beard—but I think I also had a bit of a glow about me, I think, (if you could see it beneath the whiskers). The enduring question of such experiences is not have you been momentarily transfigured, but how, if at all, have you been deeply transformed? What is it that changed in you
that will last? How do you carry the Camino with you—or some other experience with you—in the present, rather than looking back on it as if it were just a thing of the past? Because the truth is, much of life is lived in the valley. If Bruce Douglass were here, he might agree that that is a very Reformed kind of thing to say!

The valley where, as the disciples found out, there are people in need and things that need to get done. Where children get sick, and older people are looking for healing, and there are matters that must be tended to. Where lunches need to get packed for school, and new tires have to be put on, and the air filters in your house must be replaced. Where racial injustice persists, and genocides occur, and political campaigns are waged. The valley where there are budgets to meet, and tasks to get done.

There is a certain approach to religious experience and spiritual life that tries to pretend that it is all finally about the mountaintop, the event, a moment in time. I spent my teen years in Texas and there I was surrounded by people who grew up in churches that emphasized knowing the day and the hour when you “accepted Jesus.” For them, faith was very much about having a particular experience and in their congregations you could be assured that the sermons almost always ended with a call to come forward and be saved. But I always wanted to know, “What happens next?” What happens after that moment? Because I think God is more concerned with our deep transformation than with any sort of momentary transfiguration. Deep transformation takes time and effort. It comes from God, yes, it comes from God, but transformation requires intention. It takes work.

The retreat that Judith and I and Susan and our colleagues attended was all about the concept of resilience—the ability of individuals and communities and churches to bounce back, to endure hard times, to thrive in the middle of the challenges of life.

The presenter gave us a lot of wonderful information about what builds resilience and what drains resilience—and you’ll be getting some of that filtered to you in the days ahead. But perhaps one of the most important things she said was that in order to have and build resilience (I might say, to walk through the valley experiences of our lives), you need to pay attention to the intersection of three different areas: your commitments, your sense of control over some aspects of your life, and the degree of challenge you face. When people’s deep commitments and values don’t match where they are spending their time, when people feel like too many areas of their life are out of control, or when people feel too challenged, their resilience goes down. So she encouraged us to think about how we spend our time matches what we say we value, and how we can make choices and do things that show we do have some control over, if not our circumstances, then at least how we respond to them.

But when it came to challenge, she asked us to remember that, even though we can feel too challenged, there is a danger in not feeling challenged enough. "Life is supposed to be challenging," she said. "That’s the way God designed it." First of all, if it weren’t, we’d be bored.

She then talked about the difference between pleasure and enjoyment. Pleasure, she told us, doesn’t involve any effort. It’s the cup of tea or glass of wine in the evening, plopping down on the couch to watch a rerun of Law and Order or an episode of Downton Abbey, the simple little things. There’s nothing wrong with pleasure, she said. But if you think about what you enjoy—what brings you a sense of joy—those things take some degree of effort, some challenge. Putting together and preaching a sermon, playing tennis, going to a show, hosting people in your home for a party. When you get done with these things you might be tired, but it is a good kind of tired. You’ve been challenged.
Rising to the challenge is what makes life satisfying. It is also what transforms us. I know that from working out and the deep transformation that exercise has made in my physical body, but it applies in other areas as well—including our spiritual lives.

I saw a great cartoon the other day. It’s one of my favorites. There were several people lined up on a starting line. The banner overhead said, “ANNUAL INSTANT GRATIFICATION 0 MILE FUN RUN.” The caption read, “Runners to your mark. Get set. Go. Now come get your-t shirts.”

That’s not the way the spiritual life works.

This week, the season of Lent starts with Ash Wednesday. Lent is a time of re-orienting our lives, recommitting to spiritual practices, taking on new challenges. Let me invite you in the next few days to think about what sort of challenge you might take on. Not something you give up, but something you embrace.

Maybe it’s being part of a small group of other Immanuelites and in community with them reading Adam Hamilton’s book. Maybe it is saying yes when Scott or Flynn or somebody on the Nominating Committee calls you and asks you to serve in some capacity. Maybe it is reaching out to the neighbor, the stranger, the person from whom you’ve been estranged. Maybe it is finally standing up for something in which you believe deeply.

Life—and the spiritual life, in particular—is not meant to be easy. It’s just not. And you know what? Sometimes I hate that. I really hate that. But if the Apostle Paul is right and we are to be changed from glory into glory, well, that’s going to take some work. In Jesus’ name. Amen.