

Luke 9:28-43 (NRSV)

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.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first sermon I ever delivered to a congregation, some nine years ago now, was on Transfiguration Sunday. The congregation was Augustana Lutheran church in the District. I'm not sure how good the sermon was, but I'm never sure how good a sermon is.

Every preacher has a story about someone coming up in the handshake line and saying that that was the best or the worst sermon on the subject they'd ever heard and then mentioning some things that they thought were particularly memorable about what you said that you are pretty sure that you didn't say, wouldn't ever say, can't imagine saying. And after the first couple of times this happened, I began to wonder what goes on in a sermon that this should happen so often.

You see, sermons and texts aren't so much delivered as they are unleashed. You think and read and pray and reflect and rehearse. And then you let those words and those texts go off to do whatever they're going to do. And they go out and they prowl around the aisles and up and down the rows looking for open hearts and open minds. And when they find one, they kind of squeeze their way in and the bend a little to fit into the space. And often enough, the sermon the congregation hears is *better* than the sermon you thought you gave.

A sermon is a conversation involving three partners – you, the preacher and the Holy Spirit. When any of them takes the day off, the results aren't going to be very good. But when all three are active and participating, the results can be wonderful. So it follows that good sermons are sermons with three good partners hard at work.

My old friend Barbara Brown Taylor tells us that the great sermons are the ones you never hear, because they wouldn't make any sense to you, and I see what she means. My job as a preacher is frequently to tell some story or to make some observation about the community of which we are all a part, a story that illuminates the work of God in our midst. It depends entirely on this community for its life and its wonder – in another community the sermon wouldn't make any sense at all. As I look back over the sermons I have been happiest about, they've been about you, usually when I'm able to catch you doing something wonderful and thank you for it.

In today's Gospel, Peter plays the part of a clumsy preacher. Jesus and the inner circle of disciples go up onto a mountain to pray and while Jesus is praying, his face is changed and his clothes become dazzling white. He is visited by Moses and Elijah, in Judaism, representatives of the best of the Law and the Prophets. And maybe because Peter is half asleep – this is like an apostolic lock-in, after all and they've probably been up all night – he says to Jesus, let's make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Poor Peter. He's been confronted by God, he and his friends, and he can't think of a thing to say. Probably he shouldn't have said anything – the voice from the cloud tells him not to speak, in fact, but to *listen*, a point I'll come back to. But Peter is driven to speak and what he says isn't so much about this community of the disciples as it is about liturgy and worship rituals – the making of booths for the festival of the Tabernacles. When confronted with things they don't understand, preachers sometimes respond with something they think they do understand, even if it is not relevant at all.

You've probably heard sermon after sermon about the Transfiguration. And one point that preachers usually make is that eventually we have to leave the mountaintop and come back to earth and that's true as far as it goes. But for some reason, that's not what I heard in the text this time. This week I got to thinking about how the mountaintop comes to us every so often – where these people who you think you know all of a sudden appear with their faces changed and glowing like angels of God. The time when we opened the church to all the kids who were hurting after Ali and Ryan Purvis' car accident. The times we've invited our homeless guests for Safe Nights. All of the various times that we decided to go ahead with the North Wing against all the odds. When we welcomed that enormous gathering for Debbie Thorn's memorial service. Every Pentecost when we have our young people offer their faith statements. The play we put on for Maundy Thursday. Our interfaith Thanksgiving service. Relay for life. Our Christmas pageants, caroling and Cupid's Café, VBS, Shekinah and Chrysalis and the Gathering. Christmas Tree of Angels and Christmas Child, our choirs and acolytes.

And as I think about it, the mission of the church is the mission of transformation and transfiguration and when we forget that is when we get into trouble. Oh yes, we need to raise money sometimes and we need to build space in which to teach and to do ministry, but the ultimate goal is always transformation. Transformation of ourselves and each other and of the world from what it is to what it can become, from what *we* are to what *we* can become.

The readings, in one way or another, all speak of unveiling God. That, too, is what we are about, unveiling God so that we can see God at work in everything and everyone around us. The season of the Sundays after the Epiphany are all about revealing God in God's Word and God's action.

And finally, listening. The reading ends with God speaking to Peter and James and John, telling them, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him." As a community, we will be entering a period of listening. Listening to candidates for pastor here. Listening to each other as we dream our path forward for the next five or ten or a hundred years, listening to each other as we prepare a congregational profile that tells candidates about that dream. Listening to the Bishop and the Bishop's assistants as they help us through this process. Let me encourage active and honest listening as you move forward – seeking first to understand rather than to be understood. Listening for the working of the Spirit, listening for that still, small voice in the whirlwind. Listening for God.

Listening to God and to each other, unveiling God in worship and life, transforming ourselves and the world. Loving God, loving each other, teaching and learning, serving the world. It has been my great privilege to be part of all of those things here for the past five years. Is the job complete? Oh, my goodness, no, we've taken a few more steps on a journey that began centuries before us and probably will not end in my lifetime or yours. Reinhold Niebuhr tells us, "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope." But this is a hope that will not, in the end, disappoint.

When I was installed here, representatives of the congregation walked with me from sacred place to sacred place in this nave. To the baptismal font, offering me the privilege of baptizing the children of God; to the pulpit, offering the privilege of speaking to God's people; to the altar, offering the privilege of feeding God's people. These are privileges I now return to you with my gratitude.

To everyone whom I have disappointed or angered, I truly apologize. To everyone whom I have helped to serve or to grow, you're very welcome. To the many who have become so special to Linda and me, our thanks. To all of you, our love and gratitude. As First Peter says, "you are a ... royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Go with God and with our love, always.

Amen.