

“When the Morning Star Rises”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Luke 9:28-36  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
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A little recap for you on the Transfiguration: Jesus climbs to the top of a mountain with Peter, James, and John. Suddenly Jesus begins to glow like a sparkly sparkle. Beside him appear the prophets Moses and Elijah, who, as we all know, have been dead for a very long time, making an already weird story even weirder. Moses and Elijah are talking to Jesus about *his* departure from this earth, which will soon take place. Throughout this experience the disciples, somehow, feel sleepy, as they often seem to do during important moments, which is likely a spiritual immaturity manifesting itself in a physical way. Have you noticed? The people of God are so often asleep to what is most important.

The disciples do, however, manage to stay awake, during which Peter erupts with this little nugget of wisdom: “Let’s make three tents!” The narrator makes sure to point out poor Peter didn’t know what he was saying. But, who can blame him? What are WE supposed to do with a story like this? While Peter, James, and John are still trying to puzzle it all out, they are suddenly covered by a thick cloud that both overshadows them and terrifies them. Then from the cloud comes a voice, at which point at least one of the disciples wets his pants. The Bible doesn’t say that part; I’m just guessing. Anyway, the voice says, “This is my Son, listen to him!” And just like that, the whole thing is over. The cloud is gone; Moses and Elijah are gone. Jesus is no longer glowing, and they head back down the mountain telling no one what they saw. In Luke’s version, as soon as they get down from the mountain there is a crowd waiting for Jesus, including a man with a demon-possessed son begging for healing.

In the church year, we read the Transfiguration story every year as our entry point into the season of Lent; that is, this is the story that launches us forward towards the cross. What the heck does it mean? A few things, I think, are obvious: 1. We are supposed to be reminded of Moses; after all he’s right there in the scene. And if you know your Hebrew Bible, you know that after Moses would meet with God, he would have to put a veil over his face because his very skin would be shining. Apparently this was too much for the people to see—instead of being curious I imagine they suddenly wanted to take a nap and avoid the reality of a God that close. So Moses would go off alone to meet with God again, and that is when he would remove the veil. 2. Another obvious thing about the mountaintop with Jesus: God clearly states that this is God’s Son, and that the disciples should listen to him. It is what we call in theological language, a theophany, that is, a visible manifestation of God. However, Jesus’ whole existence on earth was and is a theophany, so why this specific, otherworldly moment?

Every year I try to tease it out, and every year it remains a bit of mystery, which, I think is part of the point. The Transfiguration is an invitation into the mystery of God, the mystery of Christ, the cross and the coming resurrection. I’m not sure we are supposed to fully understand. The best we can do is fully participate, stay awake, and listen.

Long after the event, when he'd had some time to process it, Peter (or one of Peter's disciples) wrote this, in 2 Peter 1, "We didn't repeat crafty myths when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Quite the contrary, we witnessed his majesty with our own eyes. He received honor and glory from God the Father when a voice came to him from the magnificent glory, saying, 'This is my dearly loved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.' In addition, we have a most reliable prophetic word, and you would do well to pay attention to it, just as you would to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." Whatever happened up there on the mountain, it was significant for Peter and shaped his ministry. When he says, "We have a most reliable prophetic word," I'm not sure what he means, but I wonder if he means Christ himself. Majestic mountaintop or down on a level place among the poor, Christ is our most reliable, prophetic, truth-telling word about who God is, and we would do well to pay attention.

One year the only way I found I could talk about the Transfiguration was in the form of writing poetry, which somehow seems fitting for such a strange text as this one. The poem has continued to speak to me through the years, so I would like to share it with you, on the off-chance it might speak to you too. This is what I make of the Transfiguration. It is my attempt at understanding, based on 2 Peter, of what we are supposed to do with it:

Keep watching the light  
Until you become light  
Keep attending to the beaming of his face  
Until you yourself are transfigured  
Keep positioning yourself  
in line with the glow  
until you feel a gleam  
break forth in you

Resist all urge to sleep-  
walk through glory  
Stay awake. Pay attention.  
Even if it scares you

Don't you ever build a tent  
you silly rash Peters  
chomping to do something  
significant, anxious to bottle  
up this extraordinary moment  
for safe-keeping.

Give your miracles away  
for free distribute the mercies  
you have known.  
Don't plop down inside  
your big cozy tent  
alone and safe,

your treasure secure.  
No. No. No.  
Run down that hill  
like a wildfire, hot  
while the power lasts,  
spread burning love  
lick the world  
like flames, do not  
veil yourself  
like Moses even  
when people ask you  
to cover up—  
such polite modesty  
does not suit you  
when your face is shining  
with the afterglow  
of God.

Glow, child, glow.  
God is pleased with you.

At the bottom of the hill  
your light will smack  
hard into pain—people's  
hurts, your own wounds  
like a wall—they call it  
the valley of the shadow  
and it is dark there.  
Run there anyway.  
Don't speak too hastily  
of Jesus or all you saw  
up on the mountain.  
It won't make much sense  
if told in haste. Also:  
no one will believe you.

So take your time meandering  
among the masses, meeting  
as many eyes as you can,  
let your gaze be a window  
into what you have seen.  
Look back into their stare,  
see more there  
than you have ever seen before.  
With those you meet exchange  
small glimmers, tiny faith flickers.

Swap burdens. Share darkness.  
Meld together.  
Hold hands.  
Journey on.

At some point in your wandering  
you will begin to wonder  
where all of this is going.  
You will raise your face and  
up ahead you will see  
a rough, wood-carved cross:  
this will shock you.  
More even than the  
darkness of the valley and  
the friendship you found there,  
this will shock you.

Jesus is hoisting  
himself up onto it,  
willingly, and he  
is mouthing the words,  
“Follow me,”  
and you will protest,  
“But, but the mountain!  
You were glowing!  
Let’s go back.  
Why didn’t I tabernacle you  
when I had the chance,  
grab hold, keep you  
encased with fabric  
and poles, stake you  
to the ground—make you stay?  
Instead I lived loose  
traveled light  
made friends  
and now you are  
leaving us  
with the sun setting  
behind you,  
possibly forever.

Silence.

Blackout grief.

No reply.

You will close your eyes and  
so will God in heaven,  
sorrow overtaking sight,

but you will *hear* the earth  
shake and rocks moan  
and a great big veil  
in the temple  
will begin to rip.  
You will hear it tearing  
and it will be  
to your ears like the  
sound of pain and the  
wailing of separation.

But it is not that.

It is the sound Moses heard  
when he would rip  
off his veil in the  
presence of God, it is  
the sound of sunshine  
cracking over the surface of  
the earth, it is the  
sound of walls between heaven  
and earth, walls between brothers  
falling down at last,  
it is the sound of  
light beams shattering  
blindness, it is the sound  
of God dying, then rising  
like a star in your heart.

Amen.