

TEMPTED BY THE PAST

Matthew 17:1-9

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Transfiguration of the Lord, February 19, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus,

‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said,

‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying,

‘Get up and do not be afraid.’

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them,

‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’

I.

In the New Testament, a little more than halfway through their time with Jesus, he begins to tell his disciples explicitly that as Son of Man, he will be put to death.¹ The leader and spokesperson for the disciples, Peter, immediately takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for his dire prediction: “This must never happen to you.” But Jesus responds famously to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan!”

Jesus then turns to all his disciples and says, again famously: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

In each Gospel, Jesus then allows this sobering call to sink in.² For six days we do not see Jesus, nor do we see any of his disciples. He then takes his inner three disciples – the aforementioned Peter and the two

¹ All three synoptic gospels have accounts of this prediction: Matthew 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:1-2; Mark 8:31-33; 9:31; 10:33-34; and Luke 9:21-28.

² In Matthew and Mark 9:2, it is six days; in Luke 9:28, “about eight days.”

fishermen/brothers, James and John – up a high mountain, where the three of them witness two dramatic events:

- Jesus himself is transfigured before their eyes, his face shining like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white.
- And two of the most dominant figures from their Jewish heritage centuries before – Moses and Elijah – appear and talk with Jesus.

What Peter and James and John see draws on much of the best of what they have experienced in the Judaism in which they have been reared and nurtured and into which Jesus was born:

- The visible presence of Moses, the liberator and lawgiver, and of Elijah, the first in a great line Hebrew prophets that stretches through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos, Hosea, and Micah.
- Together Moses and Elijah embody the phrase Jesus and the Jewish people used for their scripture at the time: “The Law and the Prophets.”
- It is as if the whole majesty of the Hebrew faith – from Creation to Deliverance to Wilderness to Land to Monarchy to Prophecy to Wisdom and finally to Promise of Messiah – is embodied in the brief light-filled Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, accompanied by Moses and Elijah:
 - Jesus’ whole being shines like the sun, reminiscent of Moses’ face when he received the Ten Commandments³
 - And the entire event occurs on a mountain where Moses had received the Ten Commandments⁴ and Jesus, a few months earlier, had given them the Sermon on the Mount.⁵

If you worship in a church which follows the lectionary of assigned readings and seasons on a three-year cycle, the Transfiguration of Christ is one of a handful of Biblical stories that appears not simply once every three years, but each year, this Sunday, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the Sunday before Lent.

II.

For centuries scholars and preachers have taught that the Transfiguration of Christ occurs so that the disciples can be *reassured* – after hearing of his predicted death – that he will be *raised* from the dead. “While weeping may endure for a night, joy comes in the morning.”⁶ It is as if these three disciples are given a *glimpse* of the resurrected Jesus – arrayed in dazzling white, transformed into what Paul will soon call a “spiritual body”⁷ – so as to survive the upcoming gruesomeness of his death. In this understanding, the Transfiguration is a glimpse of ultimate triumph in the *distant* future to strengthen them for the pain and suffering of the *immediate* future about to unfold before their eyes and ears.

³ Exodus 34:29.

⁴ Exodus 19:1-3.

⁵ Matthew 5:1.

⁶ Psalm 30:5.

⁷ I Corinthians 15:42-29.

We too need that ultimate resurrection promise to endure the seriousness of Ash Wednesday, the absence of Alleluias from our Lenten hymns, the stripping of the sanctuary following Maundy Thursday, the darkness of Good Friday and Easter Vigil, as we await the glory of Easter morning and the celebration of that day from sunrise to sunset. We need Transfiguration to get through Lent and arrive joyously home at Easter.

III.

But if the purpose of the Transfiguration is simply a reassuring glimpse of the *future*, Peter misreads it *directionally*:

*Lord, it is good for us to be here;
If you wish,
I will make three dwellings here,
one for you,
one for Moses,
and one for Elijah.*

Peter excitedly offers to build the three booths for the Harvest Festival so that Moses, Elijah, and Jesus may remain on the mountain *forever*, and so that he and James and John can remain *with them*. Peter is attempting to *freeze time*. He is preparing for the dark future by trying to avoid it. He is attempting to take what is literally a “mountaintop” experience and remain permanently ensconced within it, never having to fold up his Harvest Booths and go down the mountain to the village below. Standing in the presence of the entire richness of his religious past, Peter is tempted to remain in it. *Peter is tempted by the past.*

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Earlier this week federal researchers at the Centers for Disease Control released a “Youth Risk Behavior Survey” which has garnered an appropriately significant amount of press coverage.⁸ The results are frightening:

- Nearly one in three high school girls said they had considered suicide, a sixty per cent rise in the last decade
- Nearly 15 percent reported having been forced into sexual encounters
- About six in ten reported sadness persistent enough to have stopped regular activities.

So alarming is this report that a local theologian – Diana Butler Bass – has circulated a response entitled “The Girls Are Not Okay.”⁹

Earlier this week in an email correspondence I was bemoaning the complexity and pressure I sense that bears down on the family lives of many in our congregation, even as protected – dare I say privileged – as many of us sometimes are.

⁸ Donna St. George, Katherine Reynolds, and Lindsey Bever, “The Crisis in American Girlhood,” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/02/17/teen-girls-mental-health-crisis/>.

⁹ Diana Butler Bass, “The Girls Are Not Okay,” *The Cottage*, February 16, 2023, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-girls-are-not-okay>.

Whether it is

- Aging parents on one end and children at home on the other that pull parents literally in two directions often in two different parts of the country
- The expansion of drugs and alcohol
- The cultural battles about sexual identity and orientation that can so often lose sight of the need for each individual child or youth to be cared for as a unique person with his or her own personality and history and hopes and dreams
- The lingering effects of COVID on both learning and life
- The overwhelming presence of social media on screens in hands and earbuds in ears
- And the cultural battles over what to teach in school which can so easily treat children and youth more as political pawns than as unique learners

I was expressing sheer sadness over what children and youth and parents face today.

“I just want to go back to ‘Leave It to Beaver’” – even as I know full well that that my own upbringing was not as idyllic as his, that that world wasn’t good even for everybody who managed to live in or near it, and that I hardly ever even watched the show.

“Don’t think you can,” my correspondent replied. “It doesn’t exist, not even in fictional TV...”

In fact, “Leave It To Beaver” only ran for six seasons. It never broke into the top thirty in Nielson ratings, and it proved much more popular in re-runs than in viewership at the time. It was always a desire to return to a past that exists only in memory.¹⁰

None of us is immune from desiring to return to a past: real, imagined, or a combination of both. *We are all tempted by the past.*

IV.

In the story of the Transfiguration, even before Peter stops *filibustering*, the voice of God *interrupts*, more dramatic and overwhelming than even the visible Transfiguration of Christ. From a bright cloud, God speaks:

*‘This is my Son, the Beloved [the voice announces];
With him I am well pleased;
Listen to him!’*

There is nothing about the *past* in this voice of God. There is nothing about the *future*. There is only a call to listen – and then follow – in the *present*.

¹⁰ “Leave It to Beaver,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leave_It_to_Beaver.

*This person before you,
Today,
In this time,
And in this place,
Is my Son,
The Beloved.
With him I am well pleased.
Listen to him.
Listen to him.*

When the disciples hear this, they fall to the ground in the fear that is awe and the awe that is fear.

But Jesus steps forward and touches them. Perhaps on the shoulder or the hairline. Lightly. Gently. “Fear not,” he says. “Fear not.”

When they lift their eyes, they see “no one *except* Jesus himself *alone*.” They then follow him down the mountain, into the valley, into the village, to the *places* from which they have come, to serve him in the *time* in which they inhabit. They are probably still tempted by the *past*, but they are *resolved*, at least for the moment, to live in the *present*.

V.

In 1802, the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote one of his shortest poems. It is entitled “My Heart Leaps Up.” You may recognize it:

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky.
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

Scholars of Wordsworth have long speculated on the meaning of the poem, but all speculations center around the *constancy* at its heart:

- The constancy of *nature*, symbolized by the rainbow
- The constancy of *God’s promise* (issued after the Flood), also symbolized by the rainbow
- And the constancy of Wordsworth’s faith throughout all his days:

*...when my life began;
...now [as] I am a man;
...[and] when I grow old...*

In his poem, Wordsworth does not seek to return to the past, even as he remembers it well. Rather, he seeks to draw strength from its richness and incorporate it, integrate it, assimilate it into his present and future.

*...I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

Perhaps the poem's most famous line – “The Child is father of the Man” – is a bold statement that the adult human being Wordsworth has become has emerged from all he knew and experienced as a child. The good, the bad, the mixed. The child gives birth to the adult, and in his case, the constancy of God, expressed through the constancy of nature, led to lifelong faith.

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My friends, such an integration, such assimilation, such incorporation of what is best in our past can occur in virtually every sector of our life – personal, intimate, spiritual, family, vocational, cultural, political.

- What is most important is not that we look to the past, hoping to move back there even though all the neighbors have departed, our old home is painted a different color, and our family name is no longer on the mailbox.
- Rather, what is most important, is that we learn from what is difficult in our past and take what is best from it and incorporate both in such a way that they come alive as part of our faith and responsibility for the present.
- In this way, “the Child is indeed Parent to the Adult” for all of us, and we can look to the future answering the call of Christ in our day and time and life, in the world we have been given, not the world we might like it to be.

*‘This is my Son, the Beloved,’
Listen to him!’*

In this time. In this place. Here and now.

Amen.