

Flawed Yet Faithful sermon series  
Go Transfigure! – Matthew 17:1-13  
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I was a very inquisitive young lad growing up. I had this thirst for knowledge which was so strong that it could be annoying. I remember one time when my mom, stepfather, and I were driving around Washington D.C., I peppered them with all kinds of questions about the monuments and presidents and American history. “Why is the White House white? Why is the Washington Monument an Egyptian obelisk? Why a pentagon and not a hexagon?” Finally, my stepfather turned around and shouted, “Do you do anything besides ask questions?” And I said, “What’s wrong with questions?” At which point he jumped into the Potomac River.

This natural curiosity has served me well in ministry. I love taking a biblical passage and diving into it, asking about the context and the metaphors and the author’s mindset. We followers of Christ have lots of questions! Most of the Bible lends itself to this kind of investigation, and every once in a while it even provides an answer. After all, Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you.”

Sometimes, God answers us. Other times, God answers us but we don’t like the answers God gives us. But I’ve found that, more often, when it comes to the Bible, there are no answers at all. Trying to understand some stories is like trying to dig a hole to China with a plastic spoon. These passages teach me that not every word in scripture exists to provide an answer. I once spend a year leading a Bible study on the book of Revelation, and nothing will cure you of your desire to understand the Bible faster than studying Revelation! Ultimately, maybe the Bible isn’t meant to be understood, but experienced.

Today’s scripture is one of those perplexing passages that defies analysis. And yet, I have a lot of questions. I want to pin this story down and put it under a microscope, capture whatever truth is has for me, not let this moment pass before I extract something useful from it. What does it mean that Jesus was transfigured? What really happened up on that mountain?

In that respects, I’m a lot like Peter. Thank God for Peter! Peter gives me someone in the Bible to whom I can really relate, because Peter’s faith is almost as mercurial and as imperfect as mine. We’ve already talked about how Peter ventured out of the boat and tried to walk on water to meet Jesus, but began sinking when he took his eyes off Jesus. Just one chapter earlier Peter calls Jesus the Messiah but then tells him there’s no way he can die, earning the unfortunate rebuke from Jesus of, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Jesus realizes his disciples just don’t get it, so he needs to start over, to do a reset-i spaghetti, to give them a true glimpse of who he is so they can better understand his mission. So, he brings three of his disciples up to the top of a mountain and he transfigures. No, I don’t know what that means so don’t send your kids to ask me. And neither does Peter, but that doesn’t stop him from acting. On this mountain top, an extraordinary event was unfolding, something that defies explanation and Peter, who was the vice president in charge of doing something, had to do something. Peter is never at a loss for words, and even when he is at a loss for words, that doesn’t stop him from saying something, from seeking to understand instead of just experience.

Upon seeing the transfiguration of Jesus and the appearance of long-dead rockstars of faith Elijah and Moses, a spectacular sight which would render most people speechless, Peter pipes up and says, “It is good for us to be here. So, let’s capture the moment by building some dwellings so we can stay here a little while longer.” Although Peter’s words feel like an

interruption to this holy moment, I can't say that I blame him. After all, Jesus has been predicting his death, and this will end up being the last trip up the mountain before Jesus and the disciples start their descent to Jerusalem. The next mountain they will climb will be Golgotha, the place of the crucifixion, so Peter wants to make this moment last as long as possible.

James and John and Peter are about to get a glimpse of something extraordinary. They're going to get a sneak peek at the end of the book, where Jesus will be revealed in all his glory. In the Celtic tradition, these moments are called the "thin places," experiences in which the veil between heaven and earth is made see-through for just a moment. In the Hebrew Scriptures it's called the Shekinah, the radiance of God shining through into this dark world.

I think about my wedding day a few years ago, the birth of my two daughters, the day of my ordination. I think of October 20, 1990, which Todd Benzinger caught a foul ball behind first base off the bat of Carney Lansford and the Reds won the 1990 World Series. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that in this life we see God as if we are seeing through a glass dimly. Thin places are moments when God takes out the Windex, and for just a fleeting moment we see the world as God created it to be. These are divine moments, they are moments that defy classification or description, and they are simply breath-taking. And we feel the need to preserve them.

Based on that knowledge, I think Peter's response is perfectly human in both its eagerness and in its bone-headedness. Peter sees Jesus, Moses, and Elijah before him and says, "Wow, this is great! I've got an idea. Let's capture the moment." There's a scene in the sitcom "Modern Family" where the very type-A mom Claire is trying to get her whole family together for a picture. They're all dressed in matching white shirts and Claire has organized the picture down to every lock of hair and hand placement. But as each picture is taken, inevitably somebody is blinking, or looking the wrong way, or putting up bunny ears over someone else. Finally, Claire gives up her efforts to control things, the family starts slinging mud on their white shirts, and they end up with a messy, funny, fully authentic family photo. Like Claire, Peter tries to control and organize this holy moment, but God's voice doesn't come out of the cloud and say, "Everybody pose so I can take selfie with you." The voice says, "This is my son, listen to him!" In other words, don't worry so much about preserving the moment that you miss the moment.

We all do this, don't we? Our technological age invites this kind of behavior. A few months ago Amy and I traveled out west and had the joy of walking through Antelope Canyon, an otherworldly slot canyon carved over centuries by water running through the Arizona rock. Our Navajo tour guide lamented that people walk through the canyon taking hundreds of pictures, but don't often stop simply to experience the beauty that is around them. Having gone through the canyon once, I'd like to do it again without my phone. No pictures. No attempt to preserve the moment. Just the experience of that thin place.

Like Peter, I wonder if we don't get so concerned about keeping the moment from passing that we pass the moment. The story of the Transfiguration is meant to be enjoyed, to be wondered about, to be relished with delight rather than picked apart and meticulously interpreted. That same goes for all the precious moments in our lives where God breaks into the mundane and gives us a glimpse of the holy. Are we too busy, too distracted to miss it?

What I'm encouraging is something that I myself, a consummate question-asker, have difficulty with: the acceptance and appreciation of the mysteries of life. Christianity is a revealed religion. We learn by what is revealed to us, not by what we think up or discover on our own. That's what the voice from the cloud tells us: "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him!" There are times in life where it's appropriate to ask questions, but then there are other times,

transcendent moments that defy explanation, when what we need to do is to listen to what God is saying to us through this experience.

I'm not denouncing the asking of questions and the seeking of explanations, but sometimes the limits of our human intellect demand that we stop seeking answers and instead honor the sacredness of the moment before us, abide in the thin place, bask in the Shekinah. Every once in a while we are blessed to experience a moment, whether joyous or tragic, that is so God-filled that all we can do is simply be there. One of the most profound Shekinah moments for me happened just a few months ago, as I experienced an overwhelming sense of peace while holding my dad's hand as he took his last breath. These moments don't happen often, but I bet there are more of them than we think, if we have the eyes to see them. Because once we've been up the mountain, once we've experienced this kind of moment, we won't come down the same. We begin to see glimpses of God everywhere. They may not be much; they may feel fleeting. A smile, a conversation, a song lyric, a beam of sunshine, a flower persevering through the cold. But those holy moments in God's presence are enough to carry us through the valleys we have yet to walk.

We're walking through one of those valleys right now, a period of time called Lent, when we take a step back and examine our lives. In doing so, we are made aware once again of our utter humanness, our glaring brokenness, and our desperate need for a Savior. As we make this journey to the cross, let us take this sacred moment that God has given us simply to be in God's presence and listen to what God is trying to say to us.

Here's my hope for us: Don't work so hard to preserve the moment that you miss the moment, whether it's with God or your family or in the act of worship. I believe there are moments all around us where God is being revealed to us, through grandmothers and grandchildren, through sunsets and snowfalls, through songs and prayers and scripture, through the simple act of breaking bread and pouring the cup. Please don't miss them. It's easy to forget in this world that values productivity that sometimes you don't have to do anything. Sometimes, just being in God's presence is enough. Don't spend so much time worrying that you're going to miss it that you miss it. Simply smile and say, "Lord, it is good for us to be here!"