

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday
Sunday, March 2, 2025**

**“And All Were Astounded”
Luke 9:28-43**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our Gospel Lesson presents the Transfiguration, a glorious and radiant *and powerful* event on a mountaintop: “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” (v. 29). As Jesus is transformed before their eyes, he’s joined by Moses and Elijah who, Luke says, also “appeared in glory” (v. 31). Soon they hear God’s voice speak from a cloud, affirming Christ as God’s own Son (vv. 34-35).

In the midst of all this, Peter wants to preserve the moment, to lay hold of this event and never let it go: “Master, it is good for us to be here;” Peter says to Jesus, “let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (v. 33). Peter does not want the Transfiguration to end—and who could blame him? In this moment, the disciples were experiencing the presence of God clearly and unmistakably *and powerfully*. Suddenly, Jesus doesn’t look like just some Galilean peasant but like Son of Man coming in glory (Daniel 7:13); heroes of Jewish faith and history, Moses and Elijah, speak face-to-face; and a cloud resounds with God’s voice, making Christ’s divine identity crystal clear.

The disciples had never experienced anything like this with Jesus. There had been miracles, but nothing like this; nothing so *powerful*. Up until this point, the disciples had as much confusion as certainty, as they struggled to understand parables and teachings (which raised more questions than answers, and upended much of what they thought they knew).

But here, on the mountaintop, there’s no ambiguity, no uncertainty. Is God present here? Of course! Just look and listen; it’s clear as day. So I think we can understand why Peter wants to hold onto this: no more confusion or doubt; he’d like to stay with this clear and unambiguous *and powerful* display of the presence of God. On the mountaintop, the disciples glimpsed God in power—and Peter wants to keep it that way.

But that isn't possible—at least, not in a way that Peter could yet understand... That glorious and *powerful* display stops as suddenly as it started: “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” (v. 36). Then they began the difficult descent down the mountain—and what a change that brings: “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 convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him’” (v. 37-39).

The change, the contrast, is stark: on the mountaintop, the disciples enjoyed clarity, glory, and power; but down below, they experience confusion, anxiety, and weakness. Luke describes the scene poignantly and painfully; there's no mistaking the father's desperation. When he begs, pleads (δέομαι) with Jesus merely to “look at” his son, it's clear that this is a man who has run out of options (v. 38). And the way he describes the boy's condition, how his son is “seize[d]” and “mauled” until he “shrieks,” and “convulses” and “foams” (v. 39); it's painful to hear. Even today, with all our medical advancements, anyone who has watched a loved one suffering a seizure knows something of the powerlessness this father experienced.

And not only was the father powerless before his son's condition, the disciples were also powerless to help. “I begged your disciples to cast it out,” the father tells Jesus, “but they could not” (v. 40). Notice, it's not that they would not; it's that they “could not” (καὶ οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν). Faced with this overwhelming need, the disciples were out of their depths; faced with this suffering, the disciples of Jesus were simply powerless to help.

I think, at this point in the story, it seems like Peter's fears had been confirmed. In that powerful experience on the mountaintop, the presence of God had been crystal clear; up there, in that powerful display, God's presence was visible and audible. But down here, amid the powerlessness of that desperate father and the powerlessness of the disciples, it must have felt like God was truly gone. ‘If only we had stayed on the mountaintop, like I wanted,’ Peter may have thought to himself, ‘we'd still be close to God.’

Yet then this story takes one last turn. After expressing indignation (apparently directed at the disciples; cf. Ringe), Jesus says to the father: “Bring your son here”; then, Luke says, “While [the boy] 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” (vv. 42-43).

“And all were astounded at the greatness of God.” Notice *when* this happens: not on the mountaintop, but down below—*that’s* when everyone is amazed (ἐκπλήσσω) by God’s greatness. And in the original language, the word here for ‘greatness’ also means ‘majesty, magnificence, *glory*’ (Mounce); it’s the same word used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the mountaintop transfiguration (2 Peter 1:16). Yet where did the people acclaim God’s glory? Not on the mountain, but in the valley; not in response to God’s presence in that powerful vision, but in response to God’s presence amid powerless suffering.

If after hearing our Gospel Lesson, if someone had asked you, ‘Where is God present in this story,’ the obvious answer would’ve been: ‘On the mountaintop,’ right? There Christ stands in splendour as God’s heavenly voice resounds from a cloud. And yes, of course, God was unmistakably present on the mountaintop; yet, as it turns out, God’s presence was also revealed in the valley below... God’s glory was revealed amid power, yet God’s glory was also revealed amid powerlessness—in the compassion and kindness and healing of Christ. And whereas the mountaintop was available to only a few, it was a crowded place down in the valley.

And in all this, we discover that God was no less present in the valley than on the mountaintop. Christ was with the disciples in the heights of glory, but Christ was also with the disciples in the depths of struggle. Peter’s mistake wasn’t that he wanted to hold onto the presence of God revealed powerfully on the mountaintop; rather, Peter’s mistake was thinking that God would remain present only so long as they stayed up there on the mountaintop. See, Peter wanted to make permanent that powerful revelation of God’s nearness—because Peter did not yet realize that God would stay close as they headed back down, that God’s presence would remain near as they left the mountaintop splendour and returned to the messy world below, as they descended from power into powerlessness.

At the very centre of the Christian faith is a surprising claim—that God is eternal and mighty, yet God chose to enter into mortality and weakness in Christ for us; that God is powerful, and yet chose to experience the powerlessness of the crucifixion for us. That’s something Peter struggled with, not only here but at other times (Mt 16:23, Mk 8:33); he struggled to accept that God in Christ was entering fully into weakness for us.

But I think that's something we struggle with, too. Sometimes, people figure that when things are going well, when they feel like they've got it all together, when they're strong and healthy and powerful, that God is near; but then when things go wrong, and losses pile up, and power gives way to powerlessness, people ask, 'Where is God?' The answer is given in our Gospel Lesson today, amid weakness, where "all were astounded at the greatness of God" (v. 43). In a sense, there are two transfigurations in this story: one revealing the presence of God in power, the other in powerlessness.

Heidi Neumark, who was the longtime pastor of Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the Bronx, writes: "When [Peter] went along with James and John up to the mountaintop where Jesus was transfigured—his face shining like sun, his clothes becom[ing] swaths of flame—Peter [was] blown away by the vision. [...] But," she writes, "living up high in the rarefied air isn't the point of transfiguration. It was [...] never meant as a private experience [...] removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level." She adds: "When Peter and the others came down the mountain, they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And [there] they found transfiguration." Amen.