

Every year in the Christian church, the last Sunday before Lent is when we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus. It's not the most well-known of the Christian holy-days. My guess is even many Christians don't realize that this Transfiguration Sunday is celebrated every year. We don't have the reminders from secular society like we do for Christmas and Easter. There are no stockings to hang up, no Easter baskets to fill, no big family meal, and no decorations to fill our homes. You'd be hard pressed to find a "Happy Transfiguration" card at the store. I'm not sure why that is. Maybe the timing is too close to other holidays. Maybe the big retailers decided they could make more money by emphasizing Valentine's Day since anyone regardless of their faith tradition can celebrate being in love. Maybe it's because the Transfiguration isn't easy to explain. Transfiguration is full of awe and wonder and glory. A mountaintop moment when the divine shows up in a powerful and transformative way right in front of the disciples' eyes.

The Transfiguration feels a lot like the story of Jesus' baptism. In both stories God shows up to declare that Jesus is his beloved son. In the baptism, Jesus is bathed in water, in the Transfiguration Jesus is bathed in a heavenly light. In both stories it feels like this is the beginning of something really important. But unlike his Baptism, the Transfiguration of Jesus doesn't happen at the beginning of his ministry. By the time we meet Jesus on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah, Jesus has healed more people than we can count, he has fed multitudes of people with handfuls of food, he has challenged the Jewish religious leadership on multiple occasions, he has cast out demons and unclean spirits, he has literally walked on water. But the transfiguration is by no means at the beginning of his ministry. In fact, by the time Jesus leads Peter, James, and John to the top of this mountain, he has started to teach his disciples about his coming death and resurrection. Jesus has started to get them ready for this big transition - a transition to a time when he will no longer be physically present with them. A time when they will have to remember all that they have learned from Jesus and trust that God will be with them as they continue the work that Jesus began.

What the three disciples witness at the top of the mountain, is something miraculous. Jesus' clothes become so dazzling white that the source of this brightness

can only be of a heavenly nature. The appearance of the Moses and Elijah put Jesus in the company of two great prophets of the Jewish tradition. The text says that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus. In Mark's version of the story, Peter interrupts their conversation to say he thinks they should build tabernacles or dwelling places for the three of them. Peter is doing his best to recognize the holiness of the moment. It harkens back to an old tradition in the Jewish faith of the feast of booths to commemorate the Exodus out of Egypt but his gesture is misplaced. At this point, God interrupts and puts the focus where it should be in this moment - on Jesus. "This is my son, the Beloved, listen to him." LISTEN to him. It's as if God is shaking Peter by the shoulders and saying "would you just shut up and listen for once!"

Listen to him. This message is as much for us as it was for Peter. Listen to Jesus. Listen for the ways we are called to be disciples, to follow in the ways of Christ. But how does one listen and what exactly are we listening for? Someone asked me recently if I hear God. She said she has heard people say that God spoke to them or God told them to do something or that they talk to God. But she had never heard God's voice. I shared a story of the one time when I heard God. I don't share this story often for a few reasons. Before I had this experience I would hear stories like that and think that the person was confused or maybe even experiencing some mental health issues. Or I thought they simply made it up for some reason. It was not something I had personally experienced so I struggled to understand what they described.

The experience took place when I was visiting Pacific School of Religion for a prospective student weekend. My main objective was to see if the school would be a good fit for me and to confirm my decision to pursue ministry as my vocation. After a somewhat emotional day and a discernment workshop I was energized and excited to become a student at PSR and decided to go to my room and begin my application. Back in my room and alone with my thoughts, I began to work on the application for admission. I thought about how much my life and the life of my husband was about to change: the sacrifices we would be making, the different trajectory our path would take, and thoughts of doubt re-entered. What if I make all of these changes and come to PSR only to realize that it wasn't God's voice I had been hearing but my own? What if this

was all a big mistake? I decided to pray, on my knees, out loud, which was not something I was used to doing but for some reason it felt appropriate.

As I lifted up my concerns to God, tears began to flow. I pleaded for an answer - some way of knowing that this call was genuine. I vocalized my fears and doubts and my desire to let go of my own will and agenda and to discern what God was truly calling me to do. Suddenly a sense of calm came over me and a feeling of being held, like being wrapped in a warm blanket and I heard the words “you are on the right path.” I was caught completely by surprise. When I say I “heard the words” it wasn’t quite like someone was standing next to me talking. But it also felt very different from just a thought I was having. They felt outside of myself even if the words themselves weren’t literally audible.

The skeptic in me wants to write this off as something my mind conjured up in a moment of wishful thinking, not that I don’t believe I was on the right path, but that the voice and the feeling could have simply been my own projection. But I can’t write it off. I had a profound experience like none that I had ever experienced before or since. That experience holds me up in times of doubt continues to carry me through periods when God feels silent. Did I literally hear the voice of God or Jesus that day? I may never really know. What I do know is that the experience was profound, and it changed me.

The transfiguration reminds us to keep listening to the message of Jesus. Sometimes that listening will be done with our ears and sometimes it will be something else. We can listen to Jesus by engaging with the stories in scripture – by hearing how he treated people and spoke truth to power. We can listen to Jesus through prayer and opening ourselves up to the ways we are moved as we connect to God. We can listen to Jesus by paying attention to the world around us and looking for those holy moments in the middle of our hectic days. We can listen to Jesus by not being afraid to take big leaps of faith for the sake of loving our neighbor even if we are worried what other people might think. You see, listening is not a passive act. Listening to Jesus implies following Jesus.

Peter wanted to stay on that mountain. He wanted to drink it all in, to bask in the glory of God and to be in the presence of Jesus and Moses and Elijah for as long as possible. After all, Jesus had just been telling these same disciples that soon he would undergo great suffering and be put to death and Peter didn't want to hear it. Maybe he thought if they could just stay on this mountain, it would all be ok.

Coming off the mountain meant returning to the throngs of suffering people. It meant coming face to face with illness, brokenness, oppression, hunger, fear... all the challenges of earthly life under an oppressive empire. Jesus knew that proclaiming God's truth and living into that reality had the very real potential of getting him killed. God truth of love in place of judgement, abundance in place of scarcity, faith and hope in place of despair, forgiveness and grace in place of retribution, threatened the status quo and the powers of the day.

This story of transfiguration beckons us to make the difficult journey with Jesus. To endure the difficult valleys, to bear witness and seek an end to the suffering of others, to follow our call to love God with all our heart and all our soul and with all our mind and love neighbor as ourselves. And when it all feels like too much, to turn our attention to the awe and wonder of God. To experience our own transformation through our deepening relationship with God and Jesus. This Christian faith is a messy, confusing, difficult, and sometimes unexplainable thing. And yet in the midst of this, there are moments of transfiguration, when the light and love of God is poured out upon us, when nothing makes sense and everything makes sense at the same time. When the valleys of the world seem to disappear and we are on top of the mountain. Those moments may come in big ways and small ways - through prayer, through sunsets, through the compassion of others. May those moments carry us through the dirt and may we be unafraid to pick up our cross and follow.