

St. Paul's, Concord
March 2 & 3, 2019
Luke 9:29-36
Rev. Kate Atkinson

As we come to the end of the season of Epiphany, the season of light, we recall one of the most remarkable, one of the most inspiring events in Jesus' ministry on earth. We call this occasion the Transfiguration because, right before the eyes of Peter, James and John, Jesus went through an amazing transformation. Luke tells us that "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." (Luke 9:29)

When Jesus was transformed from ordinary to magnificent in the space of a few moments, you might expect his disciples to have been dumbfounded by the whole experience. But they weren't. Not at first anyhow. And I don't believe it was because they were so tired; I think they simply couldn't take it in.

James, John and Peter didn't *understand* how or why their teacher was suddenly radiating the brightest light, so they didn't remark on it. A few moments later, they couldn't understand where Moses and Elijah had come from so Peter fell back on practicalities and offered to put up shelters for them and Jesus. But then, when the cloud enveloped them and God's voice spoke out of it, the disciples were speechless with terror.

What about us? Do *we* know what to say? Or have we missed the point of Jesus' blinding radiance? Do we get so bogged down in practicalities that we overlook something wondrous? And do we fail to hear God's voice because we're afraid to listen?

I believe there are three important things Jesus wanted his friends to understand on the day of his transfiguration. And I believe he wants us to understand them too.

First there was the dramatic change in Jesus' appearance. In the previous verses of Luke's gospel, when Jesus had finished telling his disciples about his approaching death, he'd promised them that he would rise again, and would return "in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." (Luke 9:22, 26) Jesus' transfiguration was a foretaste of that glory. It was a hint of what was to come, for the benefit of his closest followers, to help them understand that *everything* Jesus had predicted would come to pass. Not just his suffering, not just his death, but his rising to life as well, his inheritance of his Father's kingdom, and his glorious return.

In the books of Daniel and Revelation, we read that both Daniel and John had visions of Almighty God with head, hair and clothing of brightest white and eyes like fire. (Daniel 7:9 and Revelation 1:14) When Jesus looked like this that day on the mountain, just for a few moments, he was demonstrating that he and God are one and the same.

The message to John, James and Peter – and to us – is, don't limit your perception of Jesus on the basis of how he looks on a daily basis, going about his work in Galilee. Jesus is more than wise and kind and good. He's not simply a skilled teacher or even a gifted prophet. He is the Son of God, Creator of the Universe and Savior of the World.

The second important lesson of the Transfiguration, was the appearance with Jesus of Moses and Elijah. For a short time, they stood speaking to Jesus then they disappeared and he remained. If the disciples had been in a fit state to take it on board, this would have been another powerful affirmation of Jesus' identity. The Old Testament contains the complete record of Jewish Law – of which Moses is traditionally believed to be the author. It also contains the words of many prophets who pointed to the coming of the Messiah – and Elijah is considered to be the greatest of these.

So Moses and Elijah represent the Old Covenant Law and the Prophets, and Jesus is the fulfilment of both. He isn't their conqueror or their enemy – after all, Jesus, Moses and Elijah spoke together as friends. But Jesus represents the New Covenant. He brings the promise of real salvation, permanent forgiveness and abiding love. In return, he asks Peter, James and John – and us as well – not to stand still. It's always tempting to hang onto what is familiar – to build shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah which might stop them moving to the next phase of their journey. But God and God's messengers can't be tied down. We need to take part in fulfilling God's purpose, not get in the way of that fulfilment.

The third thing we can learn from the Transfiguration, is to pay attention to God's voice. As the cloud covered the mountain top and enveloped Peter, James, John and the others, God spoke to them, using almost the same words spoken at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35)

If the transformation of Jesus' appearance wasn't enough to convince the disciples of his true identity, this declaration surely must have been. But *were* the disciples persuaded? There's plenty of evidence in their later behavior that suggests they weren't, or at least that, even if they *had* been convinced, doubts were beginning to creep in.

And as for God's instruction to listen to Jesus, the disciples often failed in that department – at least while Jesus was still with them on earth. Perhaps it *was* just too intense an experience for them. Maybe their terror *did* get in the way of their hearing – or maybe they were simply too afraid to listen because of what God's words might mean to their future life. And perhaps that's what can stop *us* listening to God.

Maybe we don't *want* to know that Jesus really is who God says he is, because that would upset too many of the safe and familiar structures we've created in our life. Maybe we don't want to *listen* to Jesus because we're afraid of what he might tell us. But if that's the case, then we're missing the whole point of why Jesus came to live among us, why he died and was resurrected and why he's coming again to gather up those who look forward to his return.

And the point is this: Jesus is a gift given by God out of overwhelming love for us. He came to teach us to love God in return and to love one another in the same way. No one who desires the very best for his people is going to tell us to do anything that will cause us harm. We *must* listen to Jesus, and act on his words, for the good of ourselves and the whole world.

Finally, Peter, James and John came down the mountain again and went back to their everyday life, saying nothing about their experience that day. Again, it may have been that they simply

weren't *capable* of putting that experience into words. But once they knew that everything really did happen as Jesus said it would; once they'd met and talked and eaten with the resurrected Lord, everything made sense and they were able to share the amazing story – as they've shared it with us through the gospels.

That sharing of the Transfiguration story is especially important to us at this particular point in time, as the people of this parish embrace the Way of Love, and focus on moving forward in our individual and corporate spiritual journeys. For anyone on a journey of faith, hearing a personal testimony of an encounter with God is the second most powerful experience they can have. (The *most* powerful, of course, is having such an encounter themselves!) Even someone who's been a Christian for years can be hugely affected by hearing how God has touched another person's life. And yet so much of the time we keep those encounters to ourselves – and no one else ever benefits from hearing about them.

The greatest thing we can learn from the Transfiguration is to make sure other people get to hear what it's all about. We need to remember how important it is to see God in Jesus, to be open to the wonder of his presence with us, ready to listen to his voice, and willing to share *all* of these things with our children, our families, our friends – with anyone who may still be standing at the foot of the mountain and longing to know what it's like at the top.