

UnTransfigured

Matthew 17:1-8

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It's one of the strangest stories in all of scripture.

Jesus takes three of his disciples up a high mountain, where he begins to glow like a light bulb – so bright, so dazzling that his skin looks like the surface of the sun and it seems like his clothes are bleached white by his transfigured body.

Then, through squinted eyes, the disciples spot there with him Moses and Elijah – two men that were supposed to be long dead.

Peter can't help but think he's seeing the beginning of the next great preaching festival. Can you imagine that line up? Moses as the opener, followed by the prophet Elijah, with Jesus headlining the show – the whole thing closing with an alter call as a stirring rendition of "Just As I Am" plays. So Peter offers to put up some tents for the talent – one for each of them, their own private dressing rooms.

But before Peter can even finish getting the words out of his mouth, a blazing white cloud overcame them. This wasn't anything like that dark, thunderous cloud that settled on Mt. Sinai when Moses received the law from God (Ex. 19:16). This one shone like lightening in a bottle.

Scripture says that strange, glowing cloud "overshadowed" them. But *over-shadowed* probably isn't the right word, assuming that it was a glowing cloud of light *and* that a glowing cloud of light would do the opposite of engulfing them in darkness. But we don't really have a word for what that experience must have been like. Maybe more like it "irradiated them" or "engulfed them in light" or "over-in-lightened" them.

The strange part to me is that up to this point, there's no mention of anyone being afraid yet. If I'd seen Jesus start to glow or somebody come back from the dead or had a cloud of light swallow me, I can guarantee you that I'd be numbered among the scared. But as Matthew tells it, it wasn't until a voice like thunder erupted from the glowing cloud that Peter, James, and John were terrified.

The voice split the atmosphere in two: "This is my son," it boomed, "my Beloved; in whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!"

The thunder echoed down the valley. The cloud dissipated. Jesus' skin waned back to it's natural dark hue, his clothes back to normal. No more Moses. No more Elijah. The show was apparently a short one – over as quickly as it all began.

While the light show hadn't scared them witless, the thunderous voice had put the disciples facedown in the dirt. In fact, they were still shaking with fear when Jesus came over, put a hand on their shoulder, and encouraged them to get up and shake off the

fear. It was all over. All that was left behind from the event was Jesus — and the feeling that what had just happened couldn't possibly be real.

We are on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. Transfiguration Sunday, it's called.

My friend, Jim Somerville, who is pastor of First Baptist Church in Richmond, VA, talks about the journey from Epiphany to Transfiguration Sunday like this:

"When I lived in Washington, D.C., I used to get up early in the morning before daylight, and tiptoe down the stairs so as not to wake anyone else. I would turn right at the bottom of the stairs, would reach around the corner and feel for the dimmer switch on the dining room wall. When I found it, I would dial it down to its lowest possible setting, then push the button, and ever so slowly begin to dial it up.

At the lowest setting, the fixture at the dining room table was only a little brighter than candlelight. At the highest setting, those five 100-watt bulbs blazed away in their frosted glass globes at full strength. You could have performed surgery right there on the dining room table.

It was a little too much for me that early in the morning, so I would start with that candlelight glow, and then dial it up slowly, letting my eyes adjust until, little-by-little, I was standing in the full, blazing brightness of 500 watts."

Jim says that he thinks that dimmer switch is the best illustration he's found for what the journey from Epiphany Sunday to Transfiguration Sunday is like — only it's like God's hand is on the dimmer switch and Jesus is the light that God is dialing up.

This story appears in each of the synoptic gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But each tells the story with a slightly different emphasis.

For instance, when Mark preaches the transfiguration, it's part and parcel to the practice throughout that gospel of Jesus doing something spectacular and then ordering all those who witnessed it to not to tell anyone about it. Biblical scholars have come to call it the "Messianic secret," because, in Mark, Jesus just keeps on doing amazing things and then immediately says to all those who witnessed it, "Shhh! Now don't tell anybody that you saw me do that."

Throughout his gospel, Luke highlights prayer. In Luke, it's not during his baptism that the heavens open and the spirit descends, but *after* his baptism while he's *praying*. In Luke, Jesus is often going off alone to *pray* in solitude. He *prays* before he chooses the twelve disciples, and it's the only gospel that records the disciples requesting that Jesus teach them to *pray*. So, it's no surprise that in Luke's version of the transfiguration, it's while Jesus was praying that God turned up the dimmer switch.

But Matthew's version is different. Matthew's version includes a detail so small, so subtle that it's easy for it to get lost in the brilliance of that glowing miracle.

You see, in every version, Jesus shines like lightening. In every version, Elijah and Moses — the law and the prophets — show up. In every version, a cloud overshadows them, and voice from the cloud says, “This is my son.” And every version, the disciples are terrified.

But it is only in Matthew that Jesus — not glowing Jesus, but returned-to-normal Jesus; not transfigured Jesus, but *untransfigured* Jesus — walks over to his terrified disciples, their faces planted in the dirt, and puts a hand on their shoulder, and says “Get up and do not be afraid.”

The truest sense of the word “encourage” — it’s fullest, most faithful meaning — is *to put courage into*. To *encourage* someone is *to put courage in* them — not just to make them feel good, but so that they can face a difficult situation, a hardship, a new sometimes terrifying reality.

Christen’s brother, Andrew, has a young precocious son named Ira. Ira is very excitable these days, because he now goes to school with the big kids. Well, Andrew has a mantra that he has instilled in Ira since Ira was very young. It began when Ira first started walking. Early on, he’d get around the house by clutching to furniture and leaning against walls and holding onto legs — and, of course, he fell... a lot. But when Ira fell, Andrew would say these words to him: “Rise up. Stand tall. Be brave.”

Every time he fell — which had to be a hundred times a day. When Ira fell, you could see his face scrunch up in frustration and disappointment. But before the tears could come, Andrew would say, “Rise up. Stand tall. Be Brave.”

And the thing was, once Ira was walking and even running with confidence, the mantra worked just as well in other aspects of his life.

It worked when he was learning to ride a bike and would crash. “Rise up, stand tall, be brave.”

It worked when he was anxious his first day of kindergarten. “Rise up, stand tall, be brave.”

It worked the first time another child teased him and hurt his feelings. “Rise up, stand tall, be brave.”

And it still works every time he’s *afraid*. “Rise up, stand tall, be brave.”

Matthew tells us that Jesus found his disciples — the ones who were supposed to follow him to the cross — quivering face down in the dirt. It says he touched them and said, “Rise up. Stand tall. Be brave.” Well, that’s not *exactly* what he said, but it is the *essence* of what he says.

Overwhelmed and overcome by fear, Jesus reached out his hand, *touched* his disciples, and *encouraged* them.

Does anything banish our fears more perfectly than simple, human touch?

You see, for the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is Emmanuel (1:23) – which means “God with us.” Through him God is made present to us – God is *with* us.

The great mystery of the miracle on the Mount of Transfiguration is not that Jesus shone like the surface of the sun. The great mystery is that Jesus *ever* came down from that type of glory to be *with us* in the first place.

“This is the way that God comes into the world: not simply the brilliant cloud of mystery, not only a voice thundering from heaven, but also a human hand laid upon a shoulder” and the words: Rise up. Stand tall. Be Brave (Patrick Willson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A: Vol. 1, 457).

It’s called the mystery of the incarnation – God packaged in human form in the person of Jesus. It was God’s way of getting to place a loving hand on a human shoulder.

Back before we knew enough about it to not be absolutely terrified of it, the men and women who contracted AIDS suffered doubly. They not only suffered the disease’s ravenous affects on the human body, but they also suffered from lack of human touch.

Psychologists and neuroscientists have come to call it *touch starvation* or *skin hunger* and they tell us that its consequences are not only felt in our emotional health, but also our physical health.

For example, Romanian orphans who came out of woefully understaffed facilities and were never held or hugged throughout their infancy have shown to suffer developmental delays, detachment disorders, and even stunted growth – all of that from not experiencing enough human touch.

Psychologists also point to the phenomenon among widowers of leaving their barbers and going to salons to get their haircut, because it’s the only time they experience the touch of woman after the death of their wives.

Human touch matters.

So imagine laying in a hospital bed and your body being destroyed by an incurable disease that is so terrifying to the world that no one will touch you. You see what I mean? The victims of AIDS suffered doubly.

Fred Craddock told the story about young man in his early twenties who was dying of that terrible disease in a hospital in Atlanta. He says:

“He had no church connection, but someone said he had a relative who had been in the church, so they called a minister of that church, and the minister went to the hospital. The young man was almost dead – emaciated, mouth agape, just gasping there, struggling for every breath. And the minister came to the hospital, stood out in the hall, and asked them to open the door. When they opened the door, he yelled in a prayer.

Another minister there in south Atlanta, down around Forest Park, heard about it and rushed to the hospital hoping he was still alive. She got to the hospital, went into the room, went over by the bed, and pulled a chair by the bed. This minister lifted his head and cradled it in her arms. She sang. She quoted scripture. She prayed. She sang. She quoted scripture. She prayed. And he died.

Some seminarians [later] asked her, ‘Weren’t you scared? He had AIDS!’

She said, ‘Of course I was scared. I bet I bathed sixty times.’

‘Well then why did you do it?’

And she said, ‘I just imagined if Jesus had gotten the call, what he would’ve done. I had to go.’” (*Craddock Stories*, 86).

You see what I mean?

The real mystery of the transfiguration event isn’t that Jesus was transfigured in his glory, but that he ever gave it up in the first place.

The real mystery is that he was *untransfigured* to begin with; that he became Emmanuel in the first place; that he chose incarnation.

And the greater mystery still is that a little bit of his glory shines through each and every time one of his followers places a loving hand on the shoulder of someone in need and says, “Rise up. Stand tall. Be brave.”

Amen.