

**The Reverend Richard E. Otty  
East Liberty Presbyterian Church  
March 6, 2011, Transfiguration Sunday  
“Coming Off the Mountain”  
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9**

Over the past couple years, I have appreciated Randy’s diligence in asking me to return to ELPC to visit and preach. My own Sunday church obligations precluded my being able to accept the invitations; yet, given my inability to hold a job for more than four years, we knew an opening would emerge. It has been five years and five days since Lynn and I drove our Budget moving trucks from Pittsburgh to Albany. We are happy to be back to share in worship and fellowship with you.

Perhaps you have been as excited as I have for this day to arrive. I have even imagined the talk around your homes during this past week. Certainly, being ELPC members, you have discussed the wisdom of no-fly zones over Libya, but has not the focus of your week been the expectation of this Sunday, this special Sunday, when you knew you would again be able to sing your favorite Transfiguration hymns? Yes, it is Transfiguration Sunday, and I expect many of you spent the past week singing “Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory,” with all four flats, in anticipation of this day. Perhaps you were even disappointed when you saw we were not singing, “Jesus on the Mountain Peak,” one of the two other Transfiguration Sunday hymns in the hymnbook.

In truth, I expect Transfiguration Sunday is on few people’s top ten lists of favorite liturgical seasons or festival days. For preachers it is sometimes simply a marker in time between Epiphany’s celebration of light’s arrival, and Lent’s discipline of prayerful preparation. Our eyes are often focused ahead on Ash Wednesday.

I will admit that, in the past, I have tiptoed around Transfiguration Sunday by either leaving town, or having an associate preach. Three years ago, when a very early Lenten season caused the Beatitudes to be omitted from the lectionary readings, I substituted them for the Transfiguration. I could rationalize doing so since more people have the Beatitude blessings on their refrigerator magnets than the images or words of the lesson we are about to hear.

If I had wanted to dodge the Transfiguration this morning, the announcement of our return in the Reaching Out provided the opening. It noted I would share what I have been doing in ministry the last five years. You might have even thought the sermon title, “Coming Off the Mountain” might be a travelogue of my life after being on the ELPC mountaintop. Yet, as special a place as ELPC is, I would insert a caution about pride for any congregation considering itself to be a mountaintop church. I also smiled yesterday when I saw the outside sign read, “Rev. Rick Otty Coming Off the Mountain,” which almost sounded like it would be a video presentation.

It is Transfiguration Sunday, that mysterious event witnessed by a trio of disciples, then passed along by oral history for several decades before the Gospel writers recorded it.

The Transfiguration, when Jesus' face shines like the sun, his clothes appear as bright as a white shirt under a black light, and the three disciples have a Mount Rushmore moment in seeing Moses, Elijah and Jesus in one place.

Douglas John Hall writes of this text: "The account of Jesus' transfiguration (metamorphosis) seems strange to the mind of all who have been conditioned by Western modernity to pay exceptional court to the great god [named] Fact...Whether we admit it or not, even those of us who think ourselves especially open to mystery feel uneasy in the presences of texts like this."<sup>1</sup>

As we turn to our Gospel text, I encourage a setting aside of the great god "Fact," allowing us to take in a scene of light, a response of fear, a touch of grace. As we do so, we will not only see with our eyes what happens to Jesus, but hear with our ears who Jesus is.

The Transfiguration of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 17:1-9. Let us listen and hear God's word to us:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.<sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.<sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.<sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.<sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."<sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

I thought of how we as disciples might react today at the end of such an experience. Perhaps, "Wow! That was a lot to process." Or, "I'll need some time to debrief or unpack all that." Yet, before we come off the mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John, let's spend a bit of time back on top with their experience.

In the Transfiguration, Matthew continues his Gospel's underlying theme of exodus for an oppressed people, and his parallels of Jesus as the new Moses – in today's text, with shining face, descending cloud, and divine announcement. While Moses and Elijah appear, Matthew's focus is clearly on Jesus. God's announcement from the cloud on the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration is the same uttered over the river of his baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him, I am well pleased..."

Then God adds that additional phrase, “Listen to him.” Just prior to this hike up the mountain, we recall Jesus asking the disciples who they said he is. Peter immediately confesses Jesus as the Messiah. Then Jesus tells them the Messiah would die and Peter rebukes Jesus, and then is rebuked back by Jesus. “Listen to him. Listen to him, Peter, this is my Son, my beloved, and I am confirming what he has told you about what being the Son of God entails; namely, death. Listen to him.”

The disciples have been with Jesus when he gave a sermon on the mount, and cast out demons and healed bodies along plains and pathways. Now, this trio of disciples are taken up a mountain and given a sharper image of Jesus’s sonship, and while never mentioned by name, it is the reality of the cross that comes into view. The gathering with Moses and Elijah is seen as a precursor to a future reunion, a preview of the kingdom of heaven, but it is not simply a proof there is a sweet by and by awaiting.

Interestingly, Peter, James and John are not overwhelmed by the radiating brightness of Jesus’ transfiguration, or even the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Peter’s idea to savor the moment by creating booths for the three has no hint of fear. It was God’s announcement from the overshadowing cloud that caused them to fall to the ground with fear. When the disciples come off the mountain, they now know their path with Jesus is toward Jerusalem and the cross – and that is frightening.

Climbing a mountain, readying oneself for a retreat, even anticipating a family or school reunion, one makes preparations, and packs provisions for the journey – water for the hike, a Bible for the retreat, and sometimes a weight loss program for the class reunion, or perhaps a memory course. Once we have hiked to a mountain’s summit, experienced the retreat, or reunited with family or classmates, we often come away excited and filled, and ready to share.

The disciples, before being struck by fear, have seen an image of Jesus after death, a glimpse of resurrection they would be anxious to share. Jesus then offers one of his, “Don’t tell anyone” instructions. A Bible study can take more time to delve into why the three were sworn to silence about this sense of a resurrection life. Some suggest the disciples could not yet fully comprehend what they had experienced, and should not share until they do. I think it is more the resurrection cannot be fully realized until one has seen the life of the cross lived, so they must head down the mountain and keep stored in their backpacks what they have seen and heard.

Each year at Christmas, Lynn’s aunt asks each of us to choose a book we would like. This year I chose Mark Twain’s autobiography. I will note when I received the book, I was amazed to find it was 2½ inches thick and a full four pounds in weight, and that is just volume one! As you may know, Twain indicated this autobiography was not to be published until 100 years after his death, a kind of waiting period to, in part, be sure any he had skewered were well settled in their graves. Yet, there has been a team of scholars working for years to put together the volume just published. In a sense, they have known things they could not reveal, in the same way as the disciples. So, as the disciples come off the mountain with both a confirmation of crucifixion and vision of

resurrection, it is as if they have Twain's heavy autobiography in their backpacks, something they must carry but cannot share. Yet, rather than it being a heavy burden, I sense it is a freeing knowledge that will support them in the days ahead.

When Moses came off the mountain in Exodus, it was time to live out the covenant. When Jesus came down after his sermon on the mount, it was time to live out the teachings of the new Moses. When Jesus and the three disciples come off the mountain in today's lesson, it is the time to live the life of the cross.

Jesus and his disciples came off the mountain, knowing the Pharisees were already plotting to destroy Jesus. Matthew was writing his Gospel for a late first century community of believers living under an empire that was oppressive and brutal to those who did not conform. We ourselves walk in a world more in tune with the lyrics of revenge than forgiveness, more focused on oil than justice, more attentive to bottom lines than human needs.

What the disciples, and we, have glimpsed on the mountaintop is God's vindication of death and Jesus in the setting of life beyond death. This gives us strength for the journey of life and faith. The path off the mountain will lead to the cross, but we have in our backpack a hope that transcends despair.

One writer puts it this way, " ... the transfiguration offers the disciples the paradox that while there is nothing they can do to save themselves from suffering, there is also no way they can shield themselves from the light of God that sheds hope in their darkest moments. The mountain was the way for God to prepare a human band of companions for the sacred journey, to offer something to hold onto when they descend into the crushing reality of the world below."<sup>2</sup>

What has the Ottys' "reality of the world" been over the past five years? I served a small urban congregation struggling to discover a mission in a time when its membership is a tenth of what its facilities were built to hold. Lynn has worked with a respite, day program for elders. For two years, I also served as the stated clerk of the Albany Presbytery, but that ended when the needs of our primary call superseded that of any church or presbytery; namely, the care for my aging parents. It is a journey others of you have made or are making.

We moved and adjusted to learning how to be of support to my mother and father. We learned, and for a time believe we had learned well, how to be caregivers. Then came a fall, the effect of which was increased by Alzheimer's, and our learning began anew. There came that period of wondering what to do, if now was the time for them to leave the house, knowing it would have to be by our insistence, not their choice. What was the right thing to do? When was the right time? Where was the right place?

In our own life journeys, we can become overcome by fear, not by the overshadowing cloud of the divine, but the confusing paralysis of not knowing what to do, either for others or for ourselves. In Matthew's telling of the Transfiguration, I find one other morsel of hope.

In Matthew alone, we find a verse neither Mark nor Luke include in the transition from the disciples' fear of God's announcement, to finding themselves alone with Jesus. I find it powerfully encouraging as we ourselves make our faith journeys. After noting the disciples had fallen to the ground, overcome with fear, Matthew adds, "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'"

The verb Matthew uses for Jesus' touch of the disciples paralyzed by fear is the same he uses when Jesus heals those paralyzed in body. It is Jesus' touch of the disciples that precedes the move off the mountain, and it is Jesus' touch that will be felt by the disciples after he has died.

Touch is a powerful image. This year, Lynn and I saw 13 of the 15 films nominated for Oscars in the short films categories. One of the live action shorts was entitled, "Wish 143." A representative of a "wish providing" foundation comes to grant the wish of a young man dying of cancer. Yet, the grantor balks when his wish is to be with a woman. In a curious twist, a priest makes an arrangement, and then in a sensitive, non-sexual scene the woman asks the young man if people have touched him, and he replies, "Only to take my vitals." In the end it is revealed the young man just desired to be held.

For me, Jesus' touch of his disciples offers a powerful hope for those paralyzed by the fears this world has to offer, from the terrors of war to the despair of not knowing the right answers for aging parents or our own lives. Unlike Peter, James, and John, we no longer have to conceal the resurrection hope that strengthens us to live life faithfully as individuals and a church. Yet, still like those three disciples, we savor Jesus' touch, accompanied with a command to rise and an assurance not to fear.

As we come to this table today, to remember Jesus in the breaking of bread, may we not only sense the strength of being fed for the challenges of our journeys, but feel the grace of his touch that says, "Get up, leave your fear, and come off the mountain with me."

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<sup>1</sup> Hall, Douglas John, in Feasting on the Word – Year A, volume 1, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p.452.

<sup>2</sup> Anschutz, Maryetta Madeleine, in Feasting on the Word – Year A, volume 1, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 456.