

February 27, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 9:28–36](#)

TITLE: **Waking to a Different Light**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

No one likes being woken up in the middle of the night by a ringing telephone. Think about a time when that's happened to you. You're in a sound slumber and the phone by the bed—whether a landline or cellphone—goes off and you roll over to squint at the clock, shudder at how early it is and then try to pull yourself together to answer the phone. Granted, sometimes it was good news. I remember days when the Pittsburgh School District had an automated phone message system that would call your house at like five in the morning to tell you when schools were closed for a snow day. Everyone liked those phone calls—at least the younger household members did. But other times, a middle of the night phone call usually meant bad news—an accident, a death, an emergency. In both cases, the hard part was trying to clear the fog out of your brain quickly enough to comprehend what we being said by the other person on the phone.

Let's just focus on the phone call part for a moment. You're sound asleep and the phone starts ringing and you answer it by saying "Hello." You try to sound alert and professional, but it is obvious that you've been awakened abruptly. What does the person on the other end of the line usually say? "Oh, I'm sorry—did I wake you?" What do you usually say? "No, no, no, I was awake—I just haven't spoken much yet." Or "I'm awake; I just have a sore throat." Basically you tell a fib and then try to move the conversation along by saying "What can I do for you?" again as we shake the fog from our brains and try to concentrate on what someone else is telling us.

Let's come at this topic again from a different angle. Several times in the bible very important information was conveyed by dreams. Actually it was more than several times—it was 21 times; 15 times in the Old Testament and 6 times in the New Testament. The most famous ones were when Jacob had a dream and saw a ladder reaching up into the heavens, with angels going up and down and God promising to him the land upon which he slept. Or there's the dream in Matthew's gospel in which Joseph is told not to divorce Mary, but to take her as his wife for the child within her was from the Holy Spirit.

Imagine having one of those dreams and then quickly waking up, trying to make sense of what you'd dreamt as your brain still in a fog and getting accustomed to the fact that you were now awake. You are looking around the room even as in your mind you can still see some of the dream-images or hear part of the message that came to you in your sleep. You tell yourself—it was only a dream; but it felt so real. In that moment you stand with one foot in two worlds—the world of your senses and a world that transcends your senses.

As people of faith, we live in the thin space between the world of our senses and the world of the spirit. We live in this world of people and things, yet we believe in the God who transcends this world—a God revealed in Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth and the resurrected and eternal Son of God. We talk about this all the time here in church, even though this whole topic is incredibly difficult to capture in words. Believe me, I am

well aware of how difficult it is to talk about this subject on a regular basis. It involves lived life and felt faith, things seen and things invisible to the eyes. But it occurred to me that a good way to appreciate the heaven and earth tension of faith language is right here in the bible story of the Transfiguration.

Jesus had just taught a huge crowd of people and miraculously fed them from a meager offering of a few loaves and fish. Later Jesus told his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and would be rejected and killed before being raised again on the third day. As if all that wasn't a lot to get their heads around, a few days later Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a mountain for a time of prayer. The three disciples were worn out and eventually they fell asleep. But at some point they were roused from their slumber—not by a ringing cellphone, but by something they couldn't immediately grasp. They saw Jesus transfigured, in dazzling clothes, talking with Moses and Elijah. There's no time to sort it out—to ask what is going on. It was without parallel—an epiphany, a unique in-breaking of God's glory into our human realm. This is not something you or I can describe beyond simply saying it was like waking from a dream and seeing a convergence of what is of heaven and what is of earth.

We're next told that Peter, just like a person trying to sound alert and rational when answering a late night phone call, says "Good thing we three are here; we can put up tents for you, Jesus, and your two honored guests." But Peter's confident voice didn't fool anyone. Even scripture says that he didn't know what he was saying. If the mental fog wasn't enough, next a cloud descended to put them all in a literal visual fog—a cloud reminiscent of the time God met with Moses up on Mt. Sinai. And out of the fog, as if from a voice speaking in a dream came the message "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.*" None of this is meant to be easily explained. All of this is about something bigger than words. It's about transcendence—it is about ultimate things, divinity, holiness, eternity. It is not about reason; it's about awe.

So what do we do with this story of the Transfiguration? Like Peter, we too find ourselves shaking our heads a bit as if wakened from a sound sleep, confronted with a description of something beyond all our experiences that concludes with a commandment to listen to Christ Jesus. I know I'd be doing you a disservice if I tried to tame down this story for you. I could say "This was a great mountaintop experience—you've had those moments, haven't you?—but no one stays on mountaintops forever. We all need to head back down to the valleys—to the highways and byways of life. It will be messy and hard at times. Jesus discovered that his path led to a cross, and we too will likely face hardships. So shake off your sleep; don't build any booths; and follow Jesus on the road of life and eternal life."

Instead of saying all that, it is better that we stand for a while beside Peter, sleep in our eyes, fog in our brains, smack dab in the middle of that thin place where heaven and earth come together and no words can do it justice. This story forces us to stop being so rational for a moment and to remind ourselves that we are in this place today to worship a God who transcends us, who far exceeds us in every way, and before whom our appropriate response is not a wise nod of the head but rather a humbled, somewhat foggy-yet-real sense of awe.

In the recent weeks, I've been asked several times what I think is going to happen to the church as we hopefully move out of our two-year pandemic purgatory. What should the church say and do post-Covid? There is some practical advice I've given. I've noted that I firmly believe we will never fully go back to way we've done church before. We will invariably do ministry in hybrid ways—in-person plus remote; sitting in the pews and watching on a screen somewhere else. And this will not just be true for Sunday morning, but also true for educational events, Sunday School, musical programs, weddings, funerals, and committee meetings. It may not be for everything we do, but I wager it will be something we consider for most things we do.

Second, I think we will work on finding ways to have fellowship with people in both of these worlds—the in-person folks and the remote folks. We will expand things like Chat features on Zoom and Facebook, so that faith interaction is not dependent on personal proximity. This will be challenging. There's nothing like having a captive audience on Sunday morning if you want to give a Stewardship message or Minute for Mission. But connecting in new ways with people wherever they may be will be critical for the future church.

Third, we will lose some people and we need to grieve these losses. Once Sunday morning physically in a church becomes optional, some will opt out—as many already have. That is sad, but it will not define us going forward.

Having made these practical points, I realized something else. The church is precisely what the world needs post-Covid. To a world on edge because of viruses and climate change, they need our message of an omnipotent Creator God. To a world hellbent on war and injustice, they need our message of a Savior, who endured a cross and tomb yet is alive for all right now. This Jesus isn't just our Sunday morning therapist. He is the one for peace, for healing the nations, to whom we are supposed to listen. To a world of greed, we come together and literally receive offerings for those in need. To a world of angry words and conspiracy theories, we pray together—volunteer together—trust that God's Holy Spirit is in our midst. All of this is hard to put into words. All of this feels a bit foggy—like we're coming out of a deep sleep. Yet we know it is true in our hearts. We know there is more than just this life. We've felt awe—we've felt forgiveness—we've felt hope—all of which the world desperately needs to hear from us right now.

None of us is expected to fully understand all of this. Which is why we are given glimpses strong enough to trouble us yet powerful enough to change us for good forever. Visions of heaven and earth; Jesus of Nazareth, yet the Christ of the resurrection and ascension. Dazzling light; voices from a cloud; things more real than reality. Each of you has glimpsed this—somehow, somewhere. Don't try to shake it off. Breathe. Listen to Christ. Walk by faith, not sight. Go now—tomorrow awaits the faith you claim today.

AMEN