

Matthew 17:1-9

17 Six days later,
Jesus took with him Peter and James
and his brother John
and led them up a high mountain,
by themselves.

²And he was transfigured before them,
and his face shone like the sun,
and his clothes became dazzling white.

³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and
Elijah, talking with him.

⁴Then 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."

⁵While 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!"

⁶When the disciples heard this,
they fell to the ground
and were overcome by fear.

⁷But Jesus came and touched them,
saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

⁸And when they looked up,
they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹As 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."

2 Peter 1:14b-21

I know that my death will come soon,
as our Lord Jesus Christ
has made clear to me.
And I will make every effort
so that after my departure you may be able at
any time to recall these things.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths
when we made known to you the power
and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,
but we had been eyewitnesses
of his majesty.

For he received honor and glory
from God the Father
when that voice was conveyed to him
by the Majestic Glory,
saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased."

We ourselves heard
this voice come from heaven
while we were with him
on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message
more fully confirmed.
You will do well to be attentive to this
as to a lamp shining in a dark place
until the day dawns
and the morning star rises in your hearts.

First of all you must understand this,
that no prophecy of scripture
is a matter of one's own interpretation,
because no prophecy ever came
by human will
but men and women moved
by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Threshold Moment

We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It is not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give others permission to do the same (DLoehr).
Come. Worship and celebrate the richness and diversity of life
in the presence of God.

SANKOFA Remember - Don't forget
Transfiguration changes the eyewitness

**A Sermon
College Hill Presbyterian Church
Tulsa, Oklahoma
February 23, 2020**

by Reverend Sheri L. Curry

INTRODUCTION

Second Peter

It's a letter that scholars date to the second century
- sometime between 100 and 150 CE.
It's the last-written work to get into the New Testament

The author writes as an eyewitness
We were there
we were on the mountain . . . with Jesus
we heard God's voice
"I was there!"

Yet, he wasn't.

The writer of this letter wasn't on the mountain with Jesus.
The writer's first words of his letter may be "Simeon Peter,
a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,"
but this writer is not the same Peter that climbed the mountain with Jesus.

You remember the stories of Peter
- the fisherman called by Jesus, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee,
to be a disciple
Peter - an eyewitness to The Transfiguration.

The one named Simon Peter,
the one Jesus called Cephas - a stone
and later called Petros - the Rock
The Peter who died on a cross in Rome in 64 CE?

That Peter could not have written this letter
sometime between 100 and 150 CE.

So, why the passionate eyewitness drama by whoever wrote 2 Peter?

Perhaps, writing through the hand of Peter the Apostle
would give gravitas to the words this author frantically pens
to the young church he feared was losing its way.

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The writer loves his people.

He wants them to remember the faith.

He wants them to escape the corruption of the world he knows.

He wants his people to know that they are God's beloved children
with all the grace and peace that comes with that knowledge.

And, he is dying.

This is the last-written piece of the NT.

It is also a last will and testament left to the apostolic church

by one whose life has been transfigured

The letter models faith in God and God's beloved

and a way of life that follows that faith

There are several sermons awaiting in this little 3-chapter book of 2 Peter

First might be about the "primitive Christian hope that Jesus would soon return
to establish his kingdom and eliminate evil from the universe."¹

A nice mix of the Second Coming and the Day of Judgement.

[It's the scare-them-into-believing approach to faith over against God's lavish grace.]

Another sermon could be entitled "What to do with 'False teachers?'"
or "Eliminate your opponents."

The author devotes the entire second chapter to this subject.

Such a sermon could have traction today.

One resource I read points out that the writer seems totally "unaware of any incongruity
between the teaching of Christian love on the one hand

and the savage abuse of fellow believers who disagree with the writer on the other."²

Too much to think through today.

A third topic available is more dense - the underpinnings of US Christian Zionism that emerge
in the text:

levels of the universe;

God's destruction;

the need to hurry up end of time as we know it

Definitely, timely topics for *another* day!

For today, we'll just stick with this:

Does the fact that the author wasn't an eyewitness to what we call THE Transfiguration,
mean that we should discard his letter . . . and his passion?

The answer is, "No!"

The last will and testament of Second Peter

¹ Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction*, Mayfield, Mountainview, CA, 1995, 313.

² *Ibid.*, 312.

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Transfiguration changes the eyewitness

- placed in the lectionary on this day -
is a reminder that the story of **Transfiguration** is not confined to Moses and Jesus
with glowing Cecil B. DeMill faces and
dazzling white robes.

Transfiguration is about being an eyewitness to the Holy
that leads to change

it's positive change -
like the metamorphosis from an inching-along furry caterpillar
to a visually captivating Blue Morpho Butterfly.

Whatever the experience, be it an event, or moment, or person
one's form or appearance changes forever into something more beautiful or spiritual.

Second Peter encountered the Divine - the Holy - in a way that changed his life forever.
He shares his passion.
And he wants us to share the story.

Changed forever . . . "like a hand-print on our hearts . . . changed for good."

Whatever the stories of faith, they need to be told
- gathered up from the past and told in the present so that we might
grow in the knowledge of God's grace in every time.

This morning, during the final hours of Black History Month,
I'd like to share with you a few stories of faith from African Americans
whose lives might give us an eyewitness account of Transfiguration
- lives changed for the good.

[Martin Luther King Junior (1929-1968)]

An obvious place to start is with **Martin Luther King Junior**
Orator, scholar, social activist, preacher, and pastor.
His mother was a teacher and his father - a preacher.
He inherited the stories of faith.

In King's final speech, he lives the Way of Jesus
- daring to take on a toxic dominate system of oppression.
And he dares to invoke The Transfiguration itself.

At the age of 39, King delivered a speech in Memphis, TN, in support of the striking sanitation
workers. King ended the speech with these words:

"I don't know what will happen now.
We've got some difficult days ahead.
But it doesn't matter with me now.
Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.
Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.
Longevity has its place.
But I'm not concerned about that now.

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I just want to do God's will.
And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain.
And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.
I may not get there with you.
But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people,
will get to the promised land.
And I'm happy, tonight.
I'm not worried about anything.
I'm not fearing any man.
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Less than 24 hours after these prophetic words, King was assassinated by James Earl Ray.

Transfigured - life changed for good . . . forever.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) family has several Transfiguration stories of change for good.

[John Gloucester (1776-1822)]

John Gloucester was born a slave in the early years of the American Revolution. In the hills of Tennessee, Gloucester encountered a white Presbyterian minister, missionary, and educator who worked among the Five Civilized Tribes and the Cherokee Nation. The pastor's name was Gideon Blackburn.

Blackburn saw potential for ministry in Gloucester,
and purchased him to be his personal servant.

With Blackburn's training, education, and contacts,
Gloucester became the first African American to actually attend
Greenville College in Tennessee . . . where Blackburn was a trustee
- a positive testament to white privilege.

In 1806, Gloucester came under care of the Presbyter of the Union in TN.

At the same time that Gloucester was studying under Blackburn,
Dr. Archibald Alexander had accepted a call to be the pastor
of Third Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.
He was also the chairman of the Evangelical Society of Philadelphia.

The Evangelical Society sent each of its members out on Sunday evenings, in teams of two,
for evangelism among the vast number of poverty-ridden free Africans
who were rapidly populating the outskirts of Philadelphia.

As the Society expanded their work and focused on the possibility of establishing an African
Presbyterian Church with an African pastor,
John Gloucester came to the attention of Dr. Archibald Alexander.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church was in Philadelphia that year
- and Blackburn was a Commissioner.
It was at that General Assembly where Alexander

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prevailed upon Blackburn for Gloucester's services.

Alexander called Gloucester to organize the work in Philadelphia.
Gloucester was given his freedom and by May 1807,
John Gloucester was street-preaching in Philadelphia on Sundays
at Seventh and Shippen (Bainbridge) Streets - but without a license to do so.

During this time, the former slave was also attempting to free his wife, Rhoda,
and their four children, who were still being held in bondage in Tennessee.
Luckily, he was able to raise \$1500 to free his family from slavery.

In 1810, Gloucester returned to the Presbyter of the Union in Tennessee
to receive ordination as the first African American to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church.
That same year, Gloucester's family joined him in Philadelphia
- brought by wagon from Tennessee to Philadelphia
by Gloucester's former master, Gideon Blackburn.

Slave-born. Bought and purchased by a Presbyterian minister in TN.
The first ordained African American minister in the Presbyterian Church
is said to have led African American Presbyterians to see the light of Christ within each of them.

Transfigured - life changed for good . . . forever.

Sometimes, moments of Transfiguration
are filled with the clarity of purpose and peace.

And sometimes, Transfiguration happens in what the great theologian Howard Thurman
called "luminous darkness"

- like the depths of the ocean where light is different than we know it.
- "Luminous darkness"
- life illuminated through our experiences of loss and grief,
of opportunities denied
 - life illuminated within disappointment and challenge;
moments that tap our abilities to be response-able
and push us to the edge where we must seek new possibilities.

Such is the story of **Lucy Craft Laney (1854-1933)**

Born in Macon, Georgia, during slavery,
Laney's father was a Presbyterian minister and a skilled carpenter
who purchased his freedom about twenty years before Laney's birth;
he purchased his wife's freedom sometime after their marriage.
When the Civil War came to an end, it was Lucy's Daddy who rang the bells
of Washington Avenue Presbyterian Church to celebrate emancipation.

At age 4 - at a time when laws prohibited African American literacy -
Laney could read and write.

At age 12, Laney was translating difficult passages in Latin
including Julius Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*.
Although Laney was able to attend Atlanta University,

women were barred from studying the classics.
So, Laney graduate from the teacher's training department and promptly started her own school
in the basement of Christ Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia.

Laws prohibiting the education of African Americans were crumbling,
yet, state funding of public education for African Americans was far from adequate.
In those years the education of African American children
depended strongly on support from the church.

When Lucy discovered that there was not a facility available for teaching so many children,
and with barely enough money for a one-way railroad ticket,
she set out for the Presbyterian General Assembly
in Minneapolis, Minnesota, hoping to get financial support.

The General Assembly denied Laney her plea and magnanimously paid her fare to return home.
Fortunately, Francine E.H. Haines, was in that convention hall that day
and would become a lifetime benefactor - the woman bearing the name of Laney's school.

In 1883, Laney established the Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia,
and served as its principal until 1933 - 50 years!

She went on to establish the first kindergarten in August for African American children
and the first nursing school for black students.

Presbyterian Elder Lucy Craft Laney, the Reverend Henry McNeal Turner, and the Reverend
Martin Luther King Jr. were the first African Americans to have their portraits
hung in the Georgia state capitol;
they were selected by Governor Jimmy Carter in 1974 forty years after Laney's death.

Laney's portrait bears tribute to "the mother of the children of the people,"
a woman who knew that
"God didn't use any different dirt to make me than the first lady of the land."

Fifty years after her death, she was in the first class to receive the Presbyterian Church Women
of Faith Award in Equality, Development, and Peace.

Ironically, nearly ninety years after her death, The National Black Presbyterian Caucus boasts
as one of its five awards the "Lucy Craft Laney Award" honoring
"individuals who refuse to be defined by the limiting constraints imposed by others."

It is an award that should also go to the acclaimed Mary Jane McLeod Bethune
- American educator, stateswoman, philanthropist, humanitarian, womanist,
and civil rights activist . . . and close friend of Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Bethune's goal in life was to be a missionary in Africa.
Upon her graduation from Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Bethune petitioned the
Presbyterian mission board to send her to Africa as a missionary.
The mission board denied her request because she was black.³

³ McCluskey & Smith, 1999, *Johnson Interview*, p.42.

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Although Mary never got over the disappointment,
she held firm to her belief in God's role in her personal history.

Mary's missionary focus shifted from Africa to Africans in America when she was appointed
by the Presbyterian Board of Education to serve as an eighth-grade teacher
under the inspiring leadership of former slave,
Lucy Craft Laney at Haines Normal Institute in Augusta, Georgia.

Transfigured - life changed for good . . . forever.

And speaking of people who just didn't fit the mold imposed by the white church

[Rev. Edler Hawkins (1907-1977)]

The **Rev. Edler Hawkins** was the first African American male moderator
of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

After being labeled as a "troublemaker" and communist,
Hawkins lost his bid for moderator at the 1960 General Assembly.
Reaffirming the church's quest for a "non-segregated church and a non-segregated society,"
he was elected moderator at the 1964 General Assembly.

While moderator, Hawkins and the stated clerk, Eugene Carson Blake,
paid a visit to Pope Paul VI in Rome.
They were the first Protestant leaders from the United States to be received by the pontiff,
and the first UPCUSA officials ever to visit a pope.

Ecumenist and professor of homiletics at Princeton Seminary focusing on the urban story.
Hawkins never stopped thinking of himself as a reconciler, in dialogue,
"hard-headed" yet "soft-hearted,"
and in a life-long longing,
striving for and witness to God's Kingdom
of racial equality and justice for all peoples.

Transfigured - life changed for good . . . forever.

[Elder Katherine G. Johnson (1918 -)]

Perhaps one of the most popular African American Presbyterians
is Elder Katherine G. Johnson,
the mathematician featured in the book and 2016 hit movie "Hidden Figures."

Born August 26, 1918 (still living!), Johnson was the brains behind one of the greatest
operations in history: the launch of astronaut John Glenn into orbit.
She was also the first African American woman to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom
and was a Commissioner to the 187th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church
. . . where she served on the finance committee.
A member of Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church in Newport News, Virginia,

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Elder Katherine sang in the choir for 50 years.

Transfigured - life changed for good . . . forever.

[Cephas Washburn (1907-1977)]

Not an African American story, yet a story closer to our hearts, is that of **Cephas Washburn**.
Cephas - a stone . . . the name given to Jesus' chosen Simon Peter

Like a stone skipping across the creek creating infinite ripples,
the ancient stories intersect with modern stories as we remember
that the life and work of Cephas Washburn has changed forever
the lives of many in Eastern Oklahoma.

Born in 1793 to a farming family in Vermont, Washburn turned from farming to education
when he feared he might be permanently disabled from a broken leg.

While teaching in Groton, Massachusetts to raise money for further education,
he became a Congregationalist and soon decided he wanted to be a missionary
to the native peoples of North America.

First working with the Savannah Missionary Society to the Eastern Cherokee,
Washburn went on to established what became the Old Dwight Mission near Russellville, AR,
for the Western Cherokee.

At the time, as many as 4000 Cherokee had fled troubles in their eastern homeland
and, helped by a treaty, were trying to establish a new homeland in Arkansas.

Washburn, his wife, his brother-in-law Reverend Alfred Finney, and others
sought to provide education and spiritual support to the Cherokee.

Washburn served as superintendent there and in 1829
when the Western Cherokee moved into Indian Territory in Marble City, OK,
Washburn was there - sympathetic to the Cherokee's loss of native lands
and interested in their traditions.

He continued as superintendent at New Dwight until 1840 when he retired from missionary
service to raise and educate his children in a more settled environment.
(There were 5 Washburn children, the first three born at Old Dwight Mission,
and the last 2 at New Dwight Mission).

The decision to resettle may have been influenced by the forced removal
of thousands of Eastern Cherokee to Oklahoma which diluted influence
from the Western Cherokee with whom Washburn had spent two decades.

The Washburns moved to Arkansas where he preached for the next two decades.
Along the way, he established a short-lived integrated school
for Indians and Euro-Americans and founded and pastored several churches.

Transfigured - life changed for good . . . forever.

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New Dwight Mission became a camp of the Synod of the Sun May 1951
and has served countless youth and provided hospitality
for numerous retreats and meetings.

Sometime in the 1980s, the PCUSA Survey found that 70% of people in churches
made that commitment because of a church camp experience.

It's no wonder.

Church camp experiences are often described as mountain top experiences.
Their vision is to create

a sense of community where no one is a stranger
a safe place to explore spirituality,
a place where you are allowed the time to rest
in the gloaming hours of sunset
- those in between moments of awe
a place where the sun breaks through the hills as you hold the stories
of the people of God in your hands.

And although the future of Dwight Mission may be in transition today,
I am hopeful that those who have been eyewitnesses to God's amazing
love, grace, peace, and community
- stories of Transfiguration - life changed forever . . . for the good -
will live *on* in you like ripples across the creek.