

# Mountaintops and Valleys

## Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

Matthew 17:1-9  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Eighteen years ago, on Easter Sunday of 2008, this community of faith heard me preach my first sermon as your installed pastor. That day marked a beginning—for me, for us, and for the shared ministry that has unfolded in ways none of us could have fully imagined back then. But if you were here during that time, you know that Easter Sunday was not actually the very first sermon you heard me preach from this pulpit.

Six weeks earlier, I stood right here to deliver my candidating sermon. After worship, we gathered for a congregational meeting, and you voted on whether to extend a call to me to serve as your installed pastor. And wouldn't you know it—on that particular Sunday, following the Revised Common Lectionary, the assigned Gospel reading was the **Transfiguration of the Lord**.

Transfiguration Sunday always falls at the very end of the season of Epiphany—the season of light, revelation, and insight—right before we turn the corner into the shadows and introspection of Lent. I remember beginning that sermon by admitting—quite candidly—that I would have preferred *not* to preach on this strange, mysterious, and rather bizarre story on such an important occasion. This was not exactly the kind of text you want when you're trying to make a good first impression. Looking back on that sermon this week, though, I was honestly surprised. It wasn't half bad—especially when I consider how much my own theology has continued to evolve, deepen, and become more explicitly progressive over the years.

In that sermon, I said something that still feels essential to say today. I said that preaching on this text offered an opportunity to share my understanding of **responsible biblical interpretation**—something I believed then, and still believe now, is important for you to know about your pastor (past, present, and future). I said that the Transfiguration is one of many biblical stories that has become a stumbling block for many people of faith, primarily because of one lingering question: **Did it really happen—literally?**

Over these past eighteen years, I've continued to return to that same question—not just with this story, but with many of the stories in Scripture that many thoughtful, intellectually honest, spiritually curious people struggle to take at face value. And here's the thing: that question matters. **Because for too long, many people were told that they had only two options—either accept every story as literal historical fact or reject the Bible altogether. That false choice has driven countless people away from the church.**

Back then, I quoted the theologian and biblical scholar **Marcus Borg**, whose work has helped so many people rediscover Scripture not as a rulebook or a science textbook, but as a living, sacred story. In his book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, Borg gave us language that has been profoundly freeing: **“taking the Bible seriously, but not literally.”** And in his later book *The Heart of Christianity*, he wrote these words:

“Yet as metaphorical narratives, these stories can be profoundly true, even though not literally factual.”

I said then—and I say again today—I couldn't agree more. Because truth is not limited to facts. And meaning is not confined to history. Stories shape us. Symbols speak to us. Metaphors reveal realities that literal language simply cannot contain.

So yes, even all these years later, I find myself offering a rather long introduction before diving into the Transfiguration story itself. But I believe it matters—especially for those who have joined this community more recently, and for anyone who may be visiting—to understand how most of us approach Scripture here at College Hill. For the record, that first sermon was titled “**Don't Just Do Something, Stand There.**” I didn't preach again on the Transfiguration until 2016.

Clearly, this story mattered deeply to the early church, because it appears in all three synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. While the details differ slightly, the core of the story remains remarkably consistent. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up an unnamed mountain. As Jesus prays, something happens. He is **transfigured**. The Greek word used here shares its root with our word **metamorphosis**—a complete transformation, a change that goes deeper than appearances. Jesus' face changes. It shines like the sun—echoing the story of Moses, whose face glowed after encountering God on Mount Sinai. His clothes become dazzling white, radiant beyond description.

Then suddenly, Jesus is joined by **Moses and Elijah**—the great Lawgiver and the great Prophet—symbolizing that Jesus stands firmly within the sacred tradition of Israel. He does not erase the law and the prophets; he embodies and fulfills them. Peter, overwhelmed and unsure what to do, does what many of us do in moments of spiritual intensity—he starts talking. He offers to build three dwellings. Let's stay here. Let's preserve this moment. Let's hold onto the mountaintop.

But before Peter can finish, a cloud descends. Fear grips the disciples. And from the cloud comes a voice—the same voice and words heard at Jesus' baptism: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” And then comes the only direct command spoken by God in the New Testament: “**Listen to him.**” The disciples fall to the ground, overcome with fear. Jesus touches them—because Jesus always meets fear with compassion—and says, “Do not be afraid.” And just as suddenly as it began, it ends. Moses and Elijah are gone. The cloud lifts. And the disciples see only Jesus. But the story doesn't stop there. **They come down the mountain.** And immediately, they encounter pain. Need. Desperation. A parent pleading for healing. **Ministry resumes. This movement—from mountain to valley—is essential. The disciples want to stay in the place of clarity and beauty. But Jesus leads them back down—because faith is not meant to be lived apart from the world.**

Every so often, you and I are blessed with moments we can't quite explain—moments when the boundary between the sacred and the ordinary, the spiritual and the material feels thin. Celtic spirituality calls these “**thin places.**” They may happen in nature, at a retreat, during worship, or in moments of profound joy or grief. But they can also happen right in the middle of ordinary life—at work, at home, in conversation, in community. **Yet those moments never last forever. And they're not meant to. Because we are not called to escape the world—we are called to be transformed for the sake of the world.**

There is one final detail I want us to linger with. After naming Jesus as beloved, God says just one thing: "**Listen to him.**" Not rush into action. Not build monuments. Not cling to the experience. Listen. We are a congregation that rightly emphasizes action. Justice matters to us. Compassion matters to us. Service matters to us. And that is good. But even **we—perhaps especially we—need to remember that sometimes the faithful response is not doing more. Sometimes the faithful response is simply reverence. Stillness. Attention. Awe. Sometimes the most radical thing we can do is stop long enough to recognize that we are already in the Presence of the Holy.** Reverence is something we progressives must reclaim—not in a fearful or rigid way, but as a deep awareness that God is present whether we feel it or not.

So whether we find ourselves on the mountaintop or in the valley, we are called to be **transformed**—by God's Presence within us, among us, and through one another. And I will close today with the same words I offered eighteen years ago:

"...together we stand in awe on the mountaintop, listening to Jesus, and then go forth into the valley, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to live out the ministry to which God is calling us now and in the days to come."

Amen.

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