

Luke 9:28-45
February 27, 2022
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An Earful¹

In the verses between last week's text and this morning's, Luke tells of Jesus' calming the storm, healing the hemorrhaging woman, feeding multitudes, and sending the twelve out to "proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." He gives the disciples power to cast out demons and cure diseases. In the midst of all of this, Jesus asks them:

'Who do the crowds say that I am?' They answered, 'John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered, 'The Messiah of God.'²

Immediately on the heels of Peter's declaration, Jesus makes one of his own. He tells the disciples what this Messiah-ship entails in the first of three passion predictions, three moments when he tells them explicitly what lies ahead:

'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'³

He is trying to paint a picture for the disciples, trying to give them a deeper understanding of what his being Messiah fully entails. It's not a path to glory in any conventional sense; it is something else entirely. [Read Luke 9:28-45]

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. It comes every year just before Lent begins. Most years, we meet Jesus on the mountain where something happens, something that gospel writers, disciples, and preachers try to make sense of. In Luke, as we just heard, Jesus makes his way to the mountain to pray with Peter, James, and John. While he is praying, we are told that Jesus'

¹ This sermon is a revision of one preached in February 2017.

² Luke 9:18-20, NRSV

³ Luke 9:22, NRSV

face changes and that his clothes become “dazzling white.” Artist and theologian Lynn Miller wonders how one would paint that dazzling white. A few years ago, she posted a picture of different whites painted on a grey board showing how many shades there are. She also points out that “pure white is much scarcer”⁴ than the others. It makes sense that pure white is rare, because this event is rare, unmatched in the rest of Luke’s gospel.

At Jesus’ baptism, we hear the voice of God proclaim that this is God’s beloved son, but it’s not clear that anyone else does. Here in the fog of a cloud, the sleepy disciples see Jesus talking with Elijah and Moses about his impending departure—not to Jerusalem but from it. The word used is *exodus*, pointing to God’s age-old intention to redeem the people, to save them from all that threatens and oppresses them, to shape a new life, a future for them—and for us—in Jesus. But first comes the mountain, the cloud, the confusion, and the mystery. In the end, the disciples do not have the words to describe it.

What about us? How would we describe it? How would we paint it? My hunch is that we would struggle to find the words just as the disciples do. And even if we did, would we dare utter a word? Would you tell anyone you had seen Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus in a cloud on Beech Mountain? Would you dare to try and capture the brightness of Jesus’ robes along with the shadow cast by the cloud? Even with two thousand years of hindsight, it is still hard to know what to make of the whole scene.

For centuries, artists have tried, but just as pure white is hard to come by, a true picture of what happens here is hard to describe in words or brush strokes. There were no photographers, no stenographers. Artists have worked with what they have been told, the stories that have been shared, and they work with the media they have—paint, wood, canvas, and stone. Some use gold

⁴ Lynn Miller, Art & Faith Matters, <https://www.facebook.com/artfaithmatters/posts/758611267640301:0>

leaf. Others use various shades of white. Still others give Jesus, Moses, and Elijah halos, so we'll know that they're the holy ones. The groggy disciples are painted in greys and blues and browns, usually cowering in fear, or hunched over with sleep and confusion. While the depictions are lovely and often haunting, like Peter's dream houses, they are human attempts to capture the mystery of an encounter with the divine, to fix the moment in a way that we can grasp.

Alexa Meade is an artist, a painter, but her approach is more than a bit unconventional. Instead of painting on canvas, she paints directly on her subjects, turning three-dimensional people into two-dimensional works of art. After graduating college with a degree in political science, she had planned to move to Washington, DC. Her dream, she says, was to work in government and sit at a desk. But she found herself fascinated—and ultimately side-tracked—by shadows. In her TED Talk, entitled “Your Body Is My Canvas,” she shows footage of her painting the shadows cast by a fence in her backyard. For a brief moment, the black paint on the grass is hidden by the shadows. When the sun moves, Alexa's shadows are visible. But Alexa wanted to explore shadows more deeply. It was more than learning to paint, which she had not really done since her sophomore year in high school. This was to be an exploration of space and light, so she did not want to learn to do art in the conventional way. She did not want to stretch a canvas or try to copy the Old Masters. She felt led to dive in and explore how she could create art *on* the subjects themselves. She shifted to painting eggs and toast and even grapefruit. She discovered that it's difficult to get paint to stick to eggs and grapefruit, by the way. When she decided to move on to human subjects, she started by painting on herself, and then expanded to other volunteers. This was hard to explain to people initially, especially when she wanted to recruit them to be her subjects. They had to be open to being vulnerable in a new way. She wasn't going to simply place them on a pedestal in her studio and paint them from a safe

distance. She was going to paint them on their skin, on their faces, on their arms and their hair. It's more intimate than most art, so I understand why some might not be game. But some did take her up on it, and the results are fascinating. She says her favorite subject so far is a retired gentleman, who not only agreed to be painted but who was also willing to be painted and then to ride the metro in DC, to be a living public art installation on display for everyone to see. The catch for many people, Alexa says is that being a subject requires a willingness to sit while someone makes you messy, a willingness to get "an earful of paint." If she's going to paint me, she's going to have to paint my ear, which of course means I will wind up with an ear filled with paint. This earful is a crucial part of the process, part of the transformation, part of the new thing she is creating.⁵

As Jesus and the disciples make their way down the mountain, they encounter a man desperate for his son to be healed. The disciples who stayed behind have been unable to do the healing Jesus had commissioned them to do. Maybe they felt unsure without Jesus right there to remind them how, or maybe they were stuck trying to mimic him. Like artists learning to paint by copying Vincent van Gogh's "Starry Night," maybe the disciples were too caught up in trying to copy Jesus' brushstrokes just so rather than painting the sky itself.

Christ's Transfiguration is confusing, and some would argue that it does little to move the story of Jesus along and even less to inform the life of faith. If we can't paint it or describe it, how can it mean much to us other than a random moment to awe and stupefy us? It does not change what we know. It does not change the course of the narrative. It is not a "mountaintop moment" in the conventional sense, where everyone is on a high, exuberant and giddy with joy from what they have experienced. I suspect that we keep coming back because we believe that

⁵ Alexa Meade, "Your Body Is My Canvas" (FYI: video includes some artistic nudity): http://www.ted.com/talks/alexa_meade

there is something there, but I wonder if all of these years of trying to figure it out, to paint it and pin it down have left us missing the point.

After Jesus heals where the disciples have not, he turns to them and tells them for a second time what lies ahead, and as he does he says: “Let these words sink into your ears.” What if Transfiguration is not simply about our understanding who Jesus is, not simply about capturing the moment in a dwelling on a hill or as a still life on a canvas using the exact right shade of dazzling white? What if this moment is about how Jesus is trying to shape his disciples? What if Jesus is the artist, not holding the twelve at a distance to gain the proper perspective but instead by drawing them close, giving them an earful of truth about what lies ahead and trying to make this new reality stick with them and in them? What if this moment is part of the process of making them something new, something brave, something bold, something the world never imagined, something the hurting and warring world still desperately needs?

Over the past two months, Rene Prager, Julie Hill, nineteen adult partners, and I have had the honor of walking alongside 19 confirmands as they have wondered, questioned, and tried to grasp what it is to say “yes” to four big questions, to prayerfully consider embracing the life of faith that their parents and this congregation have tried to nurture in them. It has been a rich and challenging time of helping them put into words what it is they believe. Like confirmands before them, they each wrote a statement of faith putting into words what faith means to them.

Repeatedly we reminded them that these statements were snapshots, a way to capture as best they could what they hold to be true in this moment. There was some nervousness about putting words on paper and about sharing these words with members of session. But as they sat at tables with session members Tuesday night, through the power of the Holy Spirit those words inspired

vibrant and holy conversations about the life of faith. We were all blessedly reminded that faith is not a fixed point or a product that we perfect. Faith is a work in progress, as are we.

I am convinced that Christ, God's beloved chosen One is determined to work with all of us as we are, to embrace our shadows and our light, and to transform us into something new and good and strong and lovely. And when it is hard to get his Word to stick with us and in us, the great good news is that he sticks with us. Jesus, God's own Word-made-flesh is driven to keep redeeming us, re-creating us. So, maybe we need to put down the pen and the paintbrushes for a moment. Maybe it is time for us to sit, to wonder, to watch and listen, to accept that we do not have all the answers, that we will never be able to capture Christ in any fixed way. If God in Christ is going to re-create us, maybe we have to let him give us an earful not simply of paint but of love, truth, challenge, passion, joy, courage, and hope. And as we let his words, God's Word-made-flesh sink into our ears and our hearts, as we—by the grace of God—become who he calls us to be, we will shine with the love of our only Savior, the artist himself. We ourselves will be living works of art, Christ's own public installations in the world, witnessing to his devotion to us and to his love for all.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.