

Coming Down the Mountain: *Luke 9:28-43a*

Norwalk Christian Church, February 7, 2016, Epiphany, Transfiguration of our Lord, Year C

Well, what a week it has been for Iowa. A week ago, all eyes were on our beloved state. Media from around the world had gathered in our capital city. A motley crew of wanna-be Presidents were here, with their security and campaign entourages. A week ago, this whole place was glowing with excitement, and stage lights, and the endless assault of campaign commercials declaring that they “approve this message.”

The cloud of global attention surrounded us and then, in a moment, it was gone and a blizzard blew in. I’ve heard some say it wasn’t a blizzard, but the wind that was created by all the candidates, campaign staff and media got out of Iowa as quickly as they could.

What a week it has been for Iowa. I don’t know about you, but I became so accustomed to everyone telling us how important we are, it’s hard to return to our “fly over state” status. (Thankfully, we have a Super Bowl to distract us!)

Maybe, maybe we can identify, if just a little bit, with Jesus and his disciples in our text this morning. Yes, I realize it might be sacrilege to compare the hype around the Iowa Caucuses to Jesus’ Transfiguration, but here we go anyway.

It’s really not that big of a reach. For a moment, like Jesus on the mountain, the whole world saw our great state of Iowa as it really is and should be--that we are beautiful and glorious, and that we do matter. And then, like flipping off the lights after a party, it was all over, and we were forced back into life as it always was.

You’ve had other moments like these, haven’t you? These mountaintop experiences when life is exactly as it should be. The celebration after winning a championship. The moment when you say to your partner, “I do.” The euphoria when your new baby is born. That feeling when you first give your life to Christ.

But it doesn’t take long for the feeling to fade, the high to become a low, and life to return to its ordinariness.

Tonight we will all be talking about the team that wins the Super Bowl, even someone like me who doesn’t care one bit about football. But what will happen on Monday? On Monday they’ll start talking about the 2016 NFL Draft.

If you noticed in the Gospel, it takes a while for the Disciples to fully realize the moment they are in. They thought it was just another trip with Jesus up a mountain, away from the crowds, where they could have some quiet, Jesus would have prayer time, and they would get a much needed nap. They thought it was an ordinary day.

But eventually, their eyes opened fully to the moment, and when they did, they saw Jesus, his face a-glow. Standing next to him were Moses and Elijah, two long-dead saints, now talking with Jesus.

And they almost slept right through it all. “Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep;” Luke tells us, “but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.”

They saw it all, and having seen it all, they knew--this was a life-changing moment, something they would remember forever. Had they had Facebook or Twitter, they would’ve posted, “You’ll never believe what happened today!; hashtag unbelievable, hashtag transfiguration, hashtag blessed.”

But they didn’t. So, what do they do? Peter speaks up, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”. Luke tells us, “He didn’t know what he was saying,” but I think he knew more than we give him credit for. He knew this moment was something special, and he wanted to do what we all want to do when we are in that moment--stay there forever.

Don’t you sometimes wish you could go back to those moments when everything was right, and just build a home and stay in that moment forever? When the marriage was perfect. When the children were completely dependent on you, and you were their whole world. When you were on fire for Christ, ready to save the world.

If we could, we’d stay on those mountaintops forever, wouldn’t we? But eventually, the clouds always blow away. The glory is turned off like a light switch. The media leaves the state. The thrill is gone. And life returns back to the way it always was.

Or does it? Life, as it always was?

In her book *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, Heidi Neumark, the pastor of the aptly named Transfiguration Lutheran Church, writes about her church as it was when she began her ministry over 20 years ago. At the time, the church stood in the midst of a community that was overtaken by poverty, crime, drug abuse. It had been forgotten, and you could tell by seeing the lack of attention to the streets or to the public schools. Transfiguration Lutheran Church didn’t know what to do, so it kept its doors tightly shut, keeping it safe from the terrifying world around it.

But then, Pastor Heidi began reflecting on the Jesus story from which her church got its name, the Transfiguration of Jesus, and in particular the part at the end, where we are told what happens after they come down from the mountain.

After this life-changing experience, one in which Peter is content to just build a house and live in forever, they come down from the mountain. And they don’t know what to do

with what they just experience. Luke tells us, “they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

And that’s when they come across a man and his only son. “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him.”

“I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” They could not. Why could they not?

Pastor Heidi writes, “When Peter and the others came down from the mountain, they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they [Peter and the disciples] found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty.... But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.”

Often when we read the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, we stop before we get to the story of the day after, and in doing so, we miss the whole point of the whole spectacle. The Disciples missed it, too. Though they woke up on the mountain and saw Jesus glowing, they completely slept through the point. I hope we do not do the same.

As Pastor Heidi concludes, “But living high up in the rarefied air isn’t the point of transfiguration....[It was] never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.”

A glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.

These things we do in here, our worship, our songs, our prayers, our fellowship together, they are glorious. But they are not the point. The point, is that through our worship of God, through our fellowship with one another, that we may get a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.

That is, that we would leave this sanctuary, come down off this mountain, and go out into our world, and when confronted by our suffering, convulsing, polarized, and possessed world, we would not throw our hands up in defeat, but would tell of a Christ who can set the whole world on fire with God’s love, if only we could have our eyes transfigured to see God’s unimagined possibility all around us.

{walk to the table}

In the lead up to last Monday's caucus, a reporter contacted Randy Ehrhart, the pastor of West Des Moines Christian Church. They wanted to interview Randy about his church, which was the host of their precinct's a Republican and Democratic caucuses. See, their church was approached to be a host site for one of the caucuses. Their board discussed it, and decided that yes, they would host, so long as they could also host the other party's caucus. And, surprisingly, both the Republicans Party and the Democratic Party thought it was a good idea.

Well, when Pastor Randy told the reporter about this plan, and about Disciples, that we were a church committed to unity in the midst of diversity and to Christ's vision of a table open to everyone, she was shocked. She had never heard of a church like this before, and she wanted to amend her story and talk about this unique church, coming together in the midst of their diversity.

On caucus night, West Des Moines Christian Church put this post on their Facebook page: "We have the Democratic and Republican Caucuses at West Des Moines Christian Church. Both caucuses are overflowing and many have to stand. Parking lot is totally full! People had to park at the Valley High School Stadium. Fun watching people intermingling between the two caucuses. Unity in the midst of diversity. It is more than a slogan. It's a possibility."

Unimagined possibility, all around us.

So now, we come again to the table of the Lord. And we remember once more that Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and he blessed it, and he broke it, and he shared it with everyone at the table. And then he took the cup, and blessed it, and shared it with everyone at the table. And it took a while for them to realize what had happened, but soon those disciples at that table caught the vision, their eyes were transfigured, and they went into the whole world turning it upside down with the love of Christ.

May our time at this table, in the presence of Christ and God's people, transfigure our eyes, so that we may see that we are loved--that this whole world is loved--by God, and that we have a message to share.

I invite our deacons to come forward, as we now give thanks for these gifts.

As communion is shared today, we will be blessed with a song called Wind Upon the Waters, a song that asks for God to awaken us from our sleep, that we may see God moving in our world and be renewed.

These are the gifts of God for you, the people of God. May you now share these gifts with one another and from this table, share them with the whole world. Amen.