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First Presbyterian Church of Athens
Transfiguration Sunday, February 7, 2016
Texts: Exo. 34:29-35, 2 Cor. 3:12-4:2, Luke 9:28-36

“About Face”

Have you ever been somewhere and seen a really beautiful sunset and tried to take a picture of it only to be disappointed? Maybe a landmark that looks amazing in person, but the camera just can't capture it? You try over and over—maybe you try a panoramic shot or a certain filter—but nothing works. Technology just can't reproduce what you are seeing. It can't even come close.

And then you realize that nobody on Facebook is going to be able to experience this in quite the way that you are. It's amazing and wonderful and mysterious, and you just have to let it be that way knowing that it will never translate to those who don't experience it for themselves. It's the problem of not being able to capture what is experienced.

I think that we have the same problem sometimes when we go to Scripture. Sometimes, we just have to soak it in. Some of us are so used to studying the Bible and extrapolating meaning from it that we don't often let the beauty of it show through. I recently heard the theologian Dale Ryan say that we have to read the Bible with an open heart for the passionate document that it is.¹ He says that the way that we often read the Bible is akin to someone sending you a letter that says “I love you,” only to find yourself parsing the verb “to love” instead of hearing the meaning that it is intended to convey.

To take that a step further, I think that there are often large portions of Scripture that we would do better to appreciate through our silent hearing of them rather than through attacking them and trying to steal meaning from them. For me, the Psalms often fall into that category. So does the book of Revelation. And probably this story of the Transfiguration that we just heard today.

We can't capture the meaning of these words in a simple way. These words appear mysterious to us, there is beauty and value in the mystery, and we should take time to appreciate that mystery.

¹ Dale Ryan, “An Open Hearted Response,” <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/an-open-hearted-response> We use videos from the Work of the People nearly every week in worship at the Presbyterian Student Center, where I serve as Campus Minister. We used this video in worship on January 26, 2016.

The mystery around this story in Luke's gospel is heightened by the way that it describes Peter, James, and John as being "weighed down with sleep," but moving toward being fully awake. For some part of this event, it seems that they are in that in-between state of consciousness that we have all experienced at one time or another. You know how you might not be sure if you are awake or asleep, and you might not trust yourself to be objective? You might even be awake, but confused because of what you were dreaming just moments earlier. It seems that the disciples might be in that state, which may be why they choose to be silent and not tell anyone what they had seen. Though they may have had doubts, it *seemed* that what was happening was factual. But even if those events are not factual, they are still true. Sometimes, dreams can be truer than reality.

I recently read the book *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry. Near the end of this book, the main character, Jayber Crow, describes a night when he was asleep in his house and the phone started ringing, which he found odd considering he didn't own a phone. When it wouldn't stop ringing, he finally decided to get out of bed and answer it. It was one of his old friends who had died a couple years back. His friend asked him to come over for a visit, so Jayber left his house and went to his friend's house, where several of his other dead friends were sitting on the front porch talking. It was morning now, and the sun was up. Jayber had a great time with them. The chapter finishes when he says, "Finally I realized where I was." The reader doesn't know if he is referring to his bed, or that porch, or some other reality. It is confusing and mysterious. Regardless of the facts, there was a lot of truth to that moment as he resolved some of the questions in his life and reconnected with those friends who had passed away.²

After a dreamlike experience, I can imagine Peter asking himself if he really tried to build dwellings for Moses and Elijah and Jesus. Did that really happen? Or was it a dream?

From our modern perspective, it would probably invalidate an experience if it occurred in less than full consciousness. In the early church, various states of consciousness were often seen as places where God could work. I think of God talking to Peter in Acts 10 after he fell into a trance. Or the numerous dream accounts in the Old Testament, like Joseph and his brothers in the book of Genesis.

I think that one problem with our modern understanding of faith is that it is too often constricted by the rigors of empirical data. Science is a wonderful tool for understanding God's world, but it is not the only tool. Limiting your faith to empirical data is, from my perspective, very similar to a literalist interpretation of Scripture. If you only allow for clear-cut, universally verifiable interpretations of faith, then you are trying to limit what God can do.

² Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2000) p. 332-333.

In Matthew 17, there is a great story of where Jesus is talking to his disciples about yeast. They mistakenly think that he is talking about the fact that they don't have enough bread to eat. Jesus responds by chiding them for not catching the fact that he was using a metaphor. He even tells them that they are lacking in faith because they are taking his words literally rather than perceiving the metaphor that he was using. That's right—Jesus says in Matthew 17 that those who interpret his words literally rather than metaphorically are lacking in faith. I think that's fascinating. According to Jesus, the ability to understand a metaphor shows greater faith.

To that end, I would say that the question of what actually happened in the transfiguration story is beside the point. Whether they were awake or asleep, whether Moses and Elijah were actually there, and whether Jesus' face was emitting light or just sunburned are all beside the point. There is a truth to this story apart from all of those things.

The point of this story was to show a truth about who Jesus was before he journeyed to Jerusalem, where he would be crucified. He was connected with two of the most important figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets. The voice of God in a cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" is a powerful and unmistakable statement about who Jesus is and what kind of authority he has. The fact that his face glowed was an obvious connection to Moses and the presence of God.

Having come this far in his ministry and knowing that he and the disciples were about to head south to Jerusalem, it was good to go to a place where he could reaffirm who he was and what he was there to do. It was good to connect to the history of the people of God and to have God's presence and promise going forward. It was good to have that transfiguration moment where clarity was somehow found in the midst of the mysterious.

I think that we are all capable of moments like these if we let them happen. These are the moments where intuition takes over and we achieve clarity of purpose, even when we think that we already have all the tools and information around us that we need. These moments are vital for the journey that we are on. For Jesus and the disciples, that moment happened on a mountain. While the mountain top experience is often a metaphor, it doesn't have to be.

This past summer, I went hiking in Galilee along a route called the Jesus Trail. The four-day trail goes from Nazareth to Capernaum. There were several times on that trail where we were pretty sure that we were no longer on the trail. Often times, the only thing to do was to climb a hill and try to see where you had come from and where you were supposed to be going. We had a guidebook, a map, and compass—but sometimes, they weren't as helpful as we had hoped.

One morning, we began our hike by heading in the wrong direction leaving the little town that we were staying in. We realized our mistake, but were still unsure about where we were going. We saw a mountain in the distance and walked toward it. As we got to the top of this mountain, we saw the Sea of Galilee for the first time and it was breathtaking. We could also see behind where we had hiked for the last two days and we could see ahead of

us where we were going to be sleeping for the next two nights. We climbed that mountain and had a moment of clarity where we had earlier been lost.

And that's where things changed for us. We went from being a little discouraged and unsure of ourselves to being excited and confident. We had the big picture emerge in front of us as we took in the geography. Confusion yielded to vision. Our energy was restored. And we were amazed at the beauty of that place. Incidentally, I tried to take pictures, but they didn't do it justice.

If there had been anyone around, then they would have noticed a big change in our demeanor and spirit. While our faces weren't glowing like Jesus or Moses, they were changed as we went from that place. That's what happened with us, and that's what happened at the transfiguration, too. Faces change as clarity is found. Jesus and the disciples found a renewed sense of direction at that place which they carried with them.

This is the same thing that we hope for in the life of the church. We want people to come to this place and be presented with a new vision for the world and to have their faces become bright as they face new directions.

Sometimes, I wonder if that's not what we do here every week. Just as Jesus, Peter, James, and John went to a holy place to connect with their history, to participate in a mystery, and to hear the voice of God before they went out to do a hard thing, so do we come to this holy place to connect with our history, to participate in a mystery, and to hear the voices of God before we go out into this world to do hard things. We are reminded who Jesus is. We are reminded who we are. We connect ourselves to the larger history. We gather around the mystery of this table as we celebrate the sacrament of communion together. And we hope that we hear the voice of God in the singing, prayers, Scripture, and dare I say preaching.

The meaning of what we do cannot be adequately captured or explained to those who don't experience it themselves. Instead, we just have to sit back and let the mystery of it all wash over us. And if it doesn't make sense or can't be explained, then that's okay. Truth can come in many different ways and not everyone will appreciate it in the same way.

If God is made known to you in the mysteries of this place and this world, then let's celebrate that. And let's be a community that works through that to help each other turn our faces toward the truth that we encounter, that we may truly be a transformative community of faith.

Amen.