

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • FEBRUARY 23, 2020 • EPIPHANY
TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

The Litany
Based on Psalm 50

*The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and shines over the earth each day
with the rising of the sun; God has blazed into view!*

At the center of all things, in towering splendor, God shines forth.

Even in the setting of the sun, our God comes and does not keep silent.

**Our God will come! Always renewing God's covenant with us,
transforming and revealing the divine presence.**

*We are but creatures before God, so let our voices cry out in praise,
and let us take our place in God's grand order of all things.*

We gather as faithful ones, join our voices in this very place.

We declare together God's righteousness! For God alone is over all things!

The Scripture
Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

The Message
A High Mountain Apart
Nick Larson

Synopsis: In the transfiguration story, which lies at the epicenter of the Gospel of Mark, is halfway between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection. A voice calls him the Beloved and for us to listen to him. What does it mean to be on the climb of life, to be striving up and up, only to realize that we too are being offered to be transformed by

God, and that might lead us back down the hill? Jesus invites us to look within ourselves, to see our individual timelines between birth and death which if we let it can transport us to several mountaintop moments with God. Sometimes we react like Peter wanting to stay and build, sometimes we are left speechless out of fear, sometimes we want to rush down the mountain to get on with life, and yet every time we can explore the ways our own mountaintop experiences with God reveal to us something about the very nature of Christ. The way of the Lenten journey we will follow is a way out of comfort and complacency, through risk and groaning, all the way to resurrection.



"Transfiguration" by Rebekah Krevens

It all starts with the most decorated champion swimmer and Olympian of all time, Michael Phelps, as he jumped into the pool for a swim race that he had been training for since he was 11 years old. It was the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and Michael was preparing to smash the world record in the 200-meter butterfly final. It was his best event, and his coach, Bob Bowman and he were hoping for a time that no one would touch for generations.

His coach, Michael Bowman, recounts that day in this way: After Michael dove into the pool, he noticed that his goggles were filling up with water, but he knew that if he stopped and took them off, that would get him disqualified from the race. As he would have broken stroke. So, he was stuck with the goggles, and by the time he was halfway through the race, Michael couldn't see anything.

Let's consider that for a moment. This is a moment that Michael has trained for his entire life. It's one of his lifetime goals, something he stared at on his goals list posted on his fridge every day, seeing it 10 or 12 times a day, every day since he was 11 years old.

Yet, here you are, in the middle of the race you've been waiting for, something you've trained for and visualized hour and hour, and now you're swimming blind. What did

Michael do? Even though, no one really knew it, Michael had been training for that, too.

It turns out that while his coach had taught him to play mental video tapes, positive visualization techniques, to vividly practice in his mind the perfect race, exactly as he wanted it. The straight positive approach.

Michel has also grown tired of that, and all on his own, he had thrown some not so perfect mental practice into the mental VHS player. Takes where variables came into play, and he had imagined all the possible, even worst-case scenario plans. And it turns out that was exactly what he had needed.

In the middle of one of the biggest races of his career, he was swimming blind, and so he went back to that mental videotape, relying on the way it worked in his head. Saying to himself, at 19 strokes I hope I hit the wall. He did.

Then in his last 50, he stayed focused on the 20 strokes it was supposed to take to finish the race. And he did.

The result was a world record, gold metal.

And yet if you ever watch the video of it, you can see Michael throwing off his cap and goggles, and he looks like somebody who got last place. He goes into this tantrum like he used to have when he was 12 years old. "My goggles filled up, I didn't know what to do, I just counted my strokes, duh duh duh duh." His coach, in that moment, had to prompt him to realize that he just set a world record and got the gold medal, so maybe he should smile.

Thinking back to watching those Olympic games, I think I remember seeing him interviewed about that race, when Michael was asked what it was like to swim blind, and he said something like, "it felt just as I imagined it would."

Michael Phelps didn't just imagine the race as if all the variables were perfectly in his favor, but all he scenarios. He had input all the scenarios so that no matter what happened he could immediately call on all these other scenarios, including being blind during the most important moment of his career!

Many of us assume that what is really needed is positive thinking to achieve our life goals and our purpose. That like the famous self-help book of 1952, *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Vincent Peale. That if you think only positive thoughts, then only positive things will come back to you.

Yet, this text, and Michael Phelps, and episode 7 of The Happiness Lab, a podcast by Dr. Lorie Santos, encourages us to not only accentuate the positive.

I think this is an excellent idea to help us see this classic transfiguration text in a new way.

This story of the transfiguration of Jesus upon the mountaintop is recorded in all three synoptic gospels. In the version we heard this morning, from the gospel of Mark, it holds a particularly relevant place at the epicenter of the gospel. As Terry shared this week, you might just think of it as a literal cliffhanger, leaving readers wondering just who this Jesus is and what he really had in mind for them.

One might see it as the closing episode of your latest binge series, that leaves you pondering at the end of season 1, just where is this story headed exactly?

In the gospel of Mark, this story, in chapter 9, lies halfway between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection. This text sits at the very core of the gospels where it asks: Who is Jesus? Who are we? Who does Jesus say that he is? Who does Jesus say that we are? Where is he taking all of us?

On one side, we climb up through stories of Jesus' healing, liberating ministry. And on the other side, we'll descend to Jerusalem. Headed towards his self-proclaimed crucifixion.

This day brings us to a clearing on the mountaintop – and from here we can survey both how far we've come and the Lenten journey ahead.

The season of Epiphany concludes today: Jesus has "shown forth" to be a healer and a liberator; a teacher and a shining prophet. He is, and has provided us with, guiding lights to show the way. Like Pastor Mark, he invites us to consider where God is in the midst of things like service, faith, movement, friend, and even death.

In the text, Peter has just called him "the Messiah" (Matthew 16:16). But most fundamentally and decisively, he is God's beloved child. His path of love will lead down into the valley, through the dry cinders of Ash Wednesday and the tears of the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow.

But this week, from here where we stand on the mountaintop, we can survey the 40 days ahead, take a deep breath – and remember that the journey through ashes and sorrow is never for its own sake.

As was shared in the Salt Project's reflection about this text, "It's for the sake of what comes next. In a word, it's for the sake of transfiguration: a radiant new life and a dazzling new world."

So what does it mean for us to be on the climb of life, to be striving up and up, only to realize that we, too, in this clearing on the mountaintop are being offered to be transformed by God, and a path that might lead us back down the hill? In a way that might be very different than we once thought, where it appears that only darkness is on the horizon?

This is where we must ask ourselves, which version of the world do we want to put our trust in? The world where positive thinking is the only thing that will get us what we want? Or can we be like Michael Phelps, and trust in the wisdom of teachings and the routine of practice, to guide us into the next part of life, even when we don't know exactly where that might lead? And we're being led blind into that next half of life?

Jesus is inviting you to look within yourself, to see your individual timeline between birth and death, which if you let it can transport you to several mountaintop moments with God. To embrace your unique gifts, to bring those to bear on the world, to share them with those around you. So that you, too, might, as I read this week, "Love God, see God, and see how love is manifest in the seeing."

That is easier said than done right? Most of us, when we encounter a moment of shear transformation, we panic.

Sometimes we react like Peter blurting out and wanting to stay and build, declaring where we are in life as a "good place to be" while tuning out the purpose and direction that our path with Jesus has already set us upon.

Sometimes we are like James and John, left speechless out of terror and fear, wondering in bewilderment, who this friend I thought I knew, could now be whiter than beached white, glowing like Moses on the mountaintops of stories of an old. Not to mention that there they stood, seeing Jesus beside Moses, the greatest Jewish teacher of all time, and the immense spiritual stature of Elijah, the prophet whom folks in Jesus' day still called for help in times of need. It would be like guitar player in your band who begins to glow and now is playing alongside John Lennon and Jimi Hendrix.

And *sometimes* we are so trained and on focused on our feet in front of us and placing pillows to brace for our inevitable fall, that we fail to look up and see the glory. We want to rush off the mountaintop experiences, because we don't want to trust them, we'd rather just get on with life.

And *sometimes*, we feel like the other nine disciples, who didn't even get to go off on this little trek up the mountain with Jesus, and we are left wondering if God might ever reveal anything to us like this.

Yet, no matter who you are or what your reaction is upon this metaphorical or literal mountaintop. Lean into the idea that this human one, this Son of Man, is and will always be the one whom the voice from on high declares as God's beloved, and that we are all invited to listen to him.

That's the invitation of the season of Lent; that's the invitation of the transfiguration. It isn't an invitation into strictly seeing. It's an invitation from within a cloud, where there is significantly less clarity in our own lives of faith than we might like. But even here, we can relate to God; not primarily through speaking but by listening.

That's the invitation I heard from Austen Hartke at the Christianity and Transgender Inclusion event we sponsored this weekend. He invited all to imagine ourselves within this grand story of God. To truly listen and affirm the stories of our fellow Christians around us. To see that God is still knitting together the world, and blessing it as it is created, exactly as it is. Land, sea, estuaries, beaches, and all. And our job is less about speaking and more about listening to the beauty and grace that has been revealed to them.

The way of Lent is the spiritual journey where we walk away from our places of comfort and into the cloud, and through risk and groaning, we travel with Christ to the cross and ultimately to the resurrection.

That's the other thing that these three disciples upon the mountaintop with Christ wouldn't have been able to recognize yet. First, that the glowing white garb in which they saw Jesus, was in his resurrection wardrobe, a hint of what is to come, even though everything is not going to go the way they expect it.

It's a little bit like diving into the pool, wondering if this is going to be your crowning achievement, only to be forced to recall the mental training that helps you swim blind, and yet still if you let it, allows you to still set a world record and win one of what would become an everlasting achievement of 8 gold medals in a single Olympic games.

That leads us right back to that question that we are all asked by this text. Who is this Jesus? And are we going to listen to him?

And what are we supposed to be doing? Climbing up the mountain of life? Or being willing to walk down it? To face the injustice of the world. To stare into the disorienting and revelatory life, death, and resurrection of Jesus so that we may glimpse what God is asking us to do with this reality of a transformed and refashioned world.

The author Bob Goff, famously says “The world will know what we believe by seeing who we love.” So, who do you need to walk out of this sanctuary and offer your love to this week?

Perhaps it is a transgender person who has been rejected by their world for being who they truly know they are? *Perhaps* it is someone who needs a mother bear to come around and surround, lifting, protecting, and bearing their struggles with them? *Or* a stranger who lives between so many things that perhaps they have begun to doubt their place in his world? *Or* a refugee or immigrant who almost goes unnoticed by the world around them, who is terrified of this place where they had hope to find safety and prosperity?

This transfiguration story tells us who Jesus is, God’s beloved Son, one of disruptive slender and yet one who just before this story tells them he must go and die for the sake of all. This is not a story of the power of positive thinking, this is realizing your goggles are filling up with water, you’re blinded by a descending cloud and all that’s left is to hear the voice inviting you to listen to Jesus, the heavenly mystery unveiled, only to watch it be veiled again, until by an empty tomb we see God’s glorious light.

Well, at least, Peter while not knowing what to say, declared this strange and odd mountaintop, as a “Good place to be.” Because here, we can clearly see that we don’t have a grasp on what comes next, but if we are quiet enough, we too might just hear God’s voice declare Jesus as God’s beloved and invite us to listen to him as well.

And that high mountain, my friends, is indeed a good place to be.