

Davidson College Presbyterian Church  
Davidson, North Carolina  
Lib McGregor Simmons  
Mark 9: 2-13  
“Light Amid the Shadows”  
Transfiguration of the Lord  
February 15, 2015

We were called to worship with these words,

We open our eyes and we see Moses and Elijah with Jesus, your word...telling a story, your [God's] story, his [Jesus's] story, our story.

The Bible is full of stories, full of stories that take place on the tops of mountains.

- Moses receives the Ten Commandments on the top of Mount Sinai. His face becomes luminous from being in such close proximity to God.
- Elijah goes to the top of Mount Horeb, and it is there that he hears, depending on which translation one reads, a “still, small voice” (KJV) of God, or the sound of “sheer silence” (NRSV), or “a sound. Thin. Quiet” (CEB).

In the stories that the Bible tells, God often hangs out on mountains, and in today's gospel reading, it is so once again.

Just before this scene of transfiguration unfolds, Jesus has been talking a blue streak about suffering and death. He says that he is going to suffer and die. Peter tries to shush him up, but Jesus doesn't just give him a mild rebuke. Rather, Jesus lays a sharp “Get behind me, Satan!” on Peter. And then he goes on to tell *all* the disciples that being a disciple means being willing to lose their lives too, for God's sake.

The story of Jesus's transfiguration takes place six days after Jesus's classroom lecture on suffering and death. At first, it is a scene of light, dazzling light in the manner of Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are all there, clothed in glistening garments, bathed in a sphere of luminosity.

And then...the clouds roll in. (1)

William Placher asked the question in his book entitled *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?” And then he answered his own question this way, “At a kind of climax in the story, Jesus appears dazzlingly to Peter, James, and John, with Moses and Elijah beside him. The obvious thing to say would be ‘Look!’ but the voice from heaven...says, not ‘Look,’ but ‘Listen to him... so that the point of the voice from heaven is to attend not to the dazzling epiphany but to the teaching about suffering.” (2)

The story of Jesus's transfiguration is evidently not as much about seeing God in the dazzling light as it is about hearing God in the midst of the shadows. The story of Jesus's transfiguration becomes *our* story as it expands our awareness and experience of a God who in Jesus opened the divine self to vulnerability and suffering and is therefore with us amid the storm clouds of our own vulnerability and suffering.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has written honestly and eloquently in his book *Lament for A Son* about his grief following the death of his twenty-five year old son in a mountain-climbing accident. In the book he reflected on the old belief that no one can see God's face and live, saying that prior to his experience of deep grief, he had thought that this meant that no one could come face to face with God's dazzling splendor and come out alive. However, as he experienced the sheer silence of God in his keening grief, a friend remarked to him that perhaps what is really meant is that no one can see God's sorrow and live. Or, perhaps, he reflects, it is the sorrow that is the splendor. (3)

Ashley-Anne Masters has written of sensing the splendor within the sorrow as she reflected recently in her blog on her mother's death two years ago.

“My mom died about thirty minutes after midnight on a Saturday night. Since Monday of that week she told everyone she was going to die on Sunday, and sure enough she kept her word with that just as she always did. Earlier that Saturday night, while I was washing her sparkly silver hair, I mentioned that if she died before midnight then she wouldn't die on my Dad's birthday, but that I understood her whole ‘I'm dying on Sunday because it's the Lord's Day and I'm going to celebrate being cancer free at the big feast’ itinerary.

Her death was as brave and beautiful as her life, and went just as she said it would. Two close family friends were with Dad and me when she died, and the four of us continued to hold her hands and talk to her, as we'd done all day that Saturday. After the Hospice nurse pronounced her, finished paperwork and went on her way, the four of us continued to sit around Mom's bed in our family room and kept talking to each other like it was any other Saturday night. Dad had a beer and the rest of us had some wine, cheese, and a random assortment of holiday snackage as we sat by her bed waiting for the funeral home to come...We laughed, shared stories, pattered around the kitchen, and took turns holding her hands a little more...

After [the funeral home people] left...our friends went home, Dad and I took naps, then spent Sunday morning cleaning closets, sorting through get well cards, and organizing the fridge full of feelings food. Later we met the same two friends for dad's birthday dinner, since it seemed like the normal thing to do. The server brought Dad's birthday dessert with a candle in it like it was any other birthday. And, it's not like any of the four of us had told the server any differently, since you can't really say to the hostess, 'We're here for a birthday and a death. See his wife just died on his birthday, but we still want cake, and maybe a table in a corner so we don't have to be so much in public since we're exhausted and may or may not cry in the brie.'

At some point before his birthday dinner, Dad mentioned he wished he had a lock of Mom's hair. I hadn't gotten him a birthday gift yet anyway, so I called the funeral home and asked that they cut a couple locks of hair for me. They graciously did, and even honored my request for them to keep it secret it so I could surprise Dad.

Today marks two years since my mom died on my dad's birthday, and it's as surreal and ordinary as it was two years ago...

There's no Pinterest board for how to celebrate life everlasting, a birthday, and grieve a death on the same day. But there is cake and there are candles. (4)

Brothers and Sisters, there is light amid the shadows. There is splendor in the sorrow. This is the tender, good teaching from our loving and gracious Savior. Listen to him. Listen to him.

Listen to him on the days when life and death hold hands in your own experience.

Listen to him when you bear witness from the two-hour distance up I-85 to the sorrow and suffering of a family of three young adults, children of God, children of Allah, who were already making the world a better, more just, more peaceful place, and were killed horribly by, yes, as hard as it is to say, another child of God whose disowning of the relationship does not make it any less so.

There is light amid the shadows. There is splendor in the sorrow. This is his story, and this is our story. Listen to him. Listen to him.

1. Nanette Sawyer, "Living the Word: Transfiguration Sunday," *The Christian Century*, February 4, 2015, 18.
2. William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 13.
3. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1987), 81. Referenced in Placher, 21.
4. Ashley-Anne Masters, <http://revaam.org/2015/01/13/birthday-candles/>