

“Light Inaccessible”
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Transfiguration Sunday
March 3, 2019
Higganum Congregational Church
First Congregational Church of Haddam

Luke 9:28-36

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

I got a new app for my phone just so I could demonstrate it for you today. (**Demonstrate neuralizer**)

For those of you unfamiliar with the “neuralizer” from the sci-fi movies “Men in Black,” this is supposed to represent the device the Men in Black police force uses to wipe out people’s memories of unusual events to keep secret the fact of space aliens living among us. Right after the light blasts you the agent tells you [an alternate explanation of whatever odd thing you’ve just seen] which replaces your memory.

There are similar tools in other stories: the Mindwipe in Total Recall, overwriting in The Matrix, and the “oblivate” spell in Harry Potter.

Storytellers play around in fiction with the idea of disrupting memory knowing they can capture our attention with these plot lines because of universal experiences of the frustration of forgetfulness- when we struggle to remember someone’s name, identify the source of our déjà vu, or recall why we went into the kitchen. More profoundly, we worry about losing our selves, or those we love to diseases and disorders of memory. Memory is precious.

Yet we forget so much. It’s how we’re made.

- Over the course of our lives, even healthy minds lose years, even decades of experiences.
 - Most adults have few conscious memories of anything before age 3 or 4, what Freud called “childhood amnesia.”

- At the other end, seniors asked to tell the story of their lives will tend to have the most-detailed memories of events between the ages of 15 and 30, with much of what happened between 30 and 70 all a bit mashed together.
- In fact, our healthy minds fail to capture hours and minutes every day.
 - When we sleep we do have a sense of time passing, which is different than being actually unconscious under anesthesia, but our dreams slip away, and we have nothing like true memories of the nighttime and napping hours which make up almost a third of our lives.
 - And as if to add insult to injury, almost no one can remember falling asleep or their thoughts or experiences a few minutes before, because though we're technically sort of awake, during that time the part of our brain called the hippocampus switches functions from mediating short term memories to sorting and storing long term ones. The fancy term for this I learned is "Sleep-related retrograde amnesia." Say that several times fast.

I mention these details because this morning we have juxtaposed as happens only occasionally Luke's story of the Transfiguration, surely one of the most memorable "theophanies" or 'manifestations of the divine' described in the Bible, and this, the Lord's Table.

Now in Luke as in the other gospels in which the story of the Transfiguration appears, Peter, John, and James don't talk about what they had witnessed until after the Resurrection. This may have been because they didn't understand it or because Jesus, as recorded more clearly in Matthew and Mark's accounts, told them not to.

But my question this morning is how is it we so often go out after sharing the "theophany" of this Holy Meal and keep quiet about what we have experienced? We, whom Jesus has told to 'remember' and proclaim?

But before we try to tackle that, just a little more biblical background. I hope you'll forgive me for leaning into that United Church of Christ "Pastor and Teacher" role today, but Luke's version of the Transfiguration story makes for a fun study.

I mentioned Matthew and Mark. In their gospels, they record Jesus telling the disciples on the way down the mountain not to say anything about what they have seen until Jesus is raised from the dead.

Luke, though, omits that instruction here, and by doing so seems intentionally to connect the Transfiguration even more strongly than the other gospels with an earlier conversation Jesus had with his disciples about his identity. If we turn back just a few verses to Luke 9:18-22, we read:

18 ...[Jesus] asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" 19 They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." 20 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

21 He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, 22 saying, “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.”

Jesus goes on to talk about ‘*taking up your cross*’ and not being ashamed of him and his words, and then our passage begins with “*Now about eight days after these sayings...*” So according to Luke, the disciples- importantly including Peter- had just a few days before heard Jesus himself explain what being “Messiah” was going to mean: suffering, death, and resurrection. This ,as you probably realize, was a surprising idea of Messiahship, which Israel typically understood as political and military victory, the very opposite of suffering and death.

But that’s what Jesus had told them. So on that mountaintop when Moses and Elijah, representatives of the Law and the Prophets, but also believed within Judaism to be so precious to God that they had not been subject to normal death or burial, when these two show up to discuss, as Luke only of the gospel writers records in Verse 31, Jesus’ “*departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem,*” you’d think that Peter would understand it was about Jesus’ upcoming death.

But instead, Peter from his sleep-befuddled brain blurts out an invitation to stay there on the mountaintop, to skip the unpleasantness ahead and just prolong the glory that he and his two friends had woken to discover around them.

And in response, God **neuralizes** them. Big time. Verses 34-35 say, “*a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”*”

Listen to him! It’s about crosses, not houses. Sweat and sacrifice, not these beautiful unstained garments.

I know it’s reading more into it than I should, but I just love that Luke, unlike Mark, doesn’t have the disciples get scared when they see the dazzling transformed figures and clothes of Jesus and the others, or even when they find themselves listening in on Moses and Elijah, you know, formerly-alive people, chatting. It’s the cloud that does it.

And even after all that, it’s like their memories just don’t work. The concept of Jesus’ upcoming death just wouldn’t stick. Beyond our passage a bit in Verse 44, we find Jesus pleading with the disciples, saying:

44 “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.”

Verse 45 reads:

45 But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

They didn’t get it. And they were afraid. Even after that astonishing vision of God’s glory. Even after hearing God’s voice.

I take Luke’s point to be this: **It is only on this side of Resurrection that we understand who Jesus is and lose our fear.**

And fortunately for us, Church, that happens to be where we live and minister. We are the spiritual descendants not of the confused and frightened disciples on that mountain, but of Peter when he preached in Jerusalem with confidence: *“This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses” (Acts 2:32)*

But God knew how frail our human memories are. God knew we might forget to remember, and be confused and fearful once more. Might try to avoid the hard parts of the story. And so Jesus on the night he was betrayed, before his “departure” from his friends, gave the gift of this memorial meal to the Church for a perpetual reminder, until his return when we will know his glory fully and forever.

Think of it: maybe this very meal is what Jesus talked about with Moses who had seen the people supplied with manna, and Elijah for whom along with the widow and her son there was food during the famine.

We have Jesus words also in St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, *“This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me”*, but they appear only in Luke among the Gospels.

The word “remembrance” is *anamnesis*, to ‘bring to mind,’ ‘to deliberately recollect.’ It is the opposite of *amnesia*.

So, my friends, let us be ‘mindful’ as we come to the Table today. May our spirits not fall asleep or forget. Let us sense God’s overwhelming presence. Let us listen for God’s voice. And ultimately, let us find Jesus alone. and follow him out into the world to share God’s glory where its splendor waits to be revealed. Amen.

Transfiguration Stories- Synoptic Gospel Parallels

Matthew	Mark	Luke
17.1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart	9.2 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves;	9.28 Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 9.29 And as he was praying,
17.2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun , and his garments became white as light .	and he was transfigured before them, 9.3 and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them.	the appearance of his countenance was altered , and his raiment became dazzling white .

<p>17.3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah, talking with him.</p> <p>17.4 And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah."</p> <p>17.5 He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."</p> <p>17.6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe.</p> <p>17.7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear."</p> <p>17.8 And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.</p>	<p>9.4 And there appeared to them Eli'jah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus.</p> <p>9.5 And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah." 9.6 For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid.</p> <p>9.7 And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."</p> <p>9.8 And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.</p>	<p>9.30 And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Eli'jah, 9.31 who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.</p> <p>9.32 Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, and when they wakened they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 9.33 And as the men were parting from him,</p> <p>Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah" --not knowing what he said.</p> <p>9.34 As he said this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 9.35 And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"</p> <p>9.36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.</p> <p>And they kept silence and told no one in those days</p>
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<p>◆ The Coming of Elijah 17.9 And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead." 17.10 And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?" 17.11 He replied, "Eli'jah does come, and he is to restore all things; 17.12 but I tell you that Eli'jah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands." 17.13 Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.</p>	<p>◆ The Coming of Elijah 9.9And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead. 9.10So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant. 9.11And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?" 9.12And he said to them, "Eli'jah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? 9.13But I tell you that Eli'jah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."</p>	<p>anything of what they had seen.</p>
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