

United Church of Christ, Kent, Ohio  
February 22, 2009, Transfiguration Sunday  
Sermon by the Rev. David Pattee, senior pastor

*Corruption by Compulsive Comment*  
Mark 9: 2-9

Hearing this story again, I think I understand what it may have been like for Peter, and suspect that all of us can, in some way, identify with his experience. If you take the event seriously -- someone you know assuming an unearthly appearance of dazzling light -- if you take it seriously, the event is fantastic, wondrous, evening frightening; and it leaves you thunderstruck, not knowing quite what to say, but feeling as if you're supposed to say something.

Too many of us, just to have something to say, to find a way of sidestepping our own vulnerabilities and insecurities, will try to trivialize or redefine or, by our words, take command of an experience that is clearly beyond us.

This compulsion to comment, to reduce the truth, is the source of so many tired clichés.

When the baby comes we say *congratulations* or *it looks just like you*. When the body dies we offer our *condolences* or suggest that *it was God's will*. When a heart is breaking, we may counsel that *it's not so bad* or *it will get better*. When a spirit overflows with joy we count the reasons, measure the cause, and list the result in our catalogue of natural occurrences. *You've been smart. You've done well. You've worked hard. You've had some luck. You've waited a long time for this.* We say how it's deserved, or at least how it makes sense in the way we think the world ought to work even when the world is not working the way we think it ought.

In our compulsive commentary we presume to define, and more often than not we are wrong. Why is it that we need to cut the truth down to a manageable size. Why is it that we feel this compulsion with Peter to build a booth, a temple, a sanctuary, where the truth can be contained and confined, maybe given a name or a word in which the mystery can be unraveled, explained, and filed away, reduced to our standards and limits, reduced to our expectations and ambitions, reduced to that realm where no longer the truth controls us, but we pretend to control it. How often in fear or insecurity or shame have we shaded the searing brilliance, invaded the humbling silence of life's mystery and God's truth, hoping like hell to cut it down to our size.

Peter did, and it's not too hard to speculate about why he did it. The truth is a very scary thing. The truth of Jesus Christ is horrifying, and Peter proposed that we build a church to contain it, and to keep it under control. The scripture says *he was terrified and did not know what to say*, but that did not ease his compulsion to say something anyway, something that very much missed the point: *Well, let's build three dwellings where we can stage and manage all of this.*

Just before this episode of the transfiguration, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist... Elijah... another of the prophets." Then he asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Christ" *the one who is going to conquer our enemies, restore righteousness, and lead us out of this mess. You are the king for whom we have been waiting.*

And then Jesus began to teach them that he was much more than the one for whom they had been waiting. He taught them that the Christ must suffer many things, and be rejected, and be killed, and after three days in death he would rise again.

Peter rebuked Jesus. *No, that's not the plan, not the way we expected, not the way it's supposed to work. You are the king of glory, the mighty one of God.*

And Jesus said to him, to Peter his leading disciple he said, "Get behind me Satan!" *If any would come after me, let them take up their cross and follow me. For those who would save their lives will lose them; but any who would lose their lives for my sake and that of the Gospel will receive life eternal.*

Jesus' transfiguration begins in the awesome mystery of suffering for righteousness. It climbs to the heights and shimmers in the light of Moses' law and Elijah's prophecy. It quakes in the echo of God's voice -- "This is my beloved Child. Listen to him." -- and again it descends to the wilderness of our world for a long walk to Jerusalem and crucifixion on the cross.

Who would want to follow in this mystery of unbearable silence, this unearthly brilliance of God's truth. Who would not want to shade the glare of suffering, and fill in the void of death with words. Who could stand to be so vulnerable, so human, and still trust the divine?

"But if any would come after me," Jesus said, *let them follow me to the fullness of life in the way of the cross.*

I submit that the meaning of God's love in Christ's sacrifice, the truth of Jesus suffering and the mystery of our lives -- the transfiguration of flesh by God's holy Word, and the glorification of God's holy Word through our flesh -- these are not available to us by defining the light or explaining the voice. They come to us by watching for what more we can see, and listening for what else there is to hear, searching our world and stretching our sense for the sights and sounds and the feel of God's love.

It is easier to accept that in Jesus Christ God lived, fully present to us in flesh and blood. It's not such a stretch to believe it because in our better moments we believe it about ourselves. In our better moments we believe that we are children of God, with a divinely ordained dignity just a little less than the angels. We want to believe that God was in him and with us through that wonderful life: his birth in Bethlehem announced by choirs of angels; his deliverance from many dangers and evils; his brilliance as a boy; his courage as a man; his kindness, his vitality, his power to heal and the depth of his love.

It's easier to claim the presence of God in his life because in our better moments we recognize the transcendence given to our own lives: the divine spark, the holy light of our true humanity. We cherish the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the divinity of his humanity, but we're not so quick to claim the truth of his crucifixion and his death. We want to see that God lived in Jesus, but we don't really want to know, or even to consider that God's love is vulnerable... that, in Jesus Christ, God's love was crucified.

That's why he says not to tell anyone yet about this great transfiguration they have seen -- because it's not yet complete, it can't be understood apart from his death and resurrection

It's an article of faith, at the center of Christian truth. It's a fact reported in scripture, established by eyewitnesses who loved him and others who reviled him. It's a fundamental tenet of our creed, repeated over and over again through the centuries in prayers and hymns and all manner of testimony. It's not myth or mystery, it's history: Jesus of Nazareth was crucified while Pontius Pilate was Roman procurator of Judea. He was betrayed and abandoned by some of his closest friends, and he was killed by the most cruel method of execution ever devised.

He died. And in as much as we believe that he was the Son of God, the human incarnation of God, God fully present and alive in our flesh, so we must also recognize his death. If God lived in Jesus Christ, then God died in Jesus Christ.

Christ died for me. In the Christian tradition it's said so often that we've almost made it easy to believe, easy to accept -- until the nitty gritty of life smacks you square in the face. Then it gets hard -- hard to believe that Christ died, hard to accept that God submitted to death -- because that means there is no escape for us. The journey of eternal life in Christ is through death, not around it. Our salvation is by way of the cross.

Some of us have preferred to believe in a part-time God who only pretended to the experience of death in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. But the truth of Jesus Christ is Emmanuel: God with us in our mortality, especially at its worst, God with us struggling to get through our fears and doubts, our sin and death, struggling to call us through our mortality to share the eternity of life in love.

Sometimes people will ask me a question like, *You seem to be a fairly normal guy? How can you stand to be a pastor?* Usually what they're referring to is the part of my work where I am with people in their pains and troubles, fears and doubts, unhappiness, sickness and death. Some people wonder, "How can you take it? How can you possibly find satisfaction in it?" And the truth is that these crisis moments are the most difficult parts but, also, they are the most exhilarating part of ministry, because all the junk is stripped away. All the pretense and posturing is gone. Finally we get down to the naked truth, the bottom line questions of what life is and what makes life good? Who are we, how do we matter, and why is it worth the bother?

We matter because of our relationships. Life is good by virtue of our capacity to love and to be loved. Our ability to take risks and make sacrifices on behalf of another -- loving is our life. In love there is no escape, no escape from death, but there is victory, there is hope and resurrection, there is in loving, I believe, a life that is eternal.

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