

Sermon February 22, 2009  
*The View from Transfiguration Mountain*  
**The Rev. Janie Donohue**

This is the day for stopping. It is the stopping day. Stop. Breath.

This is our last Sunday together before the beginning of Lent. In the weeks since Christmas we have walked through a series of Epiphanies— revelations or manifestations of God’s presence in Christ. We began with the Magi from the East kneeling before the crib and knowing nothing, but that everything had changed. We stood at the Jordan as Jesus was baptized by John, and heard the voice of God audibly declare Jesus to be God’s beloved son. We saw the Spirit of God alighting on him. We heard Jesus teach crowds and heal the sick; we were amazed. And now we reach the pinnacle of epiphanies, the Transfiguration. It is time to stop. It is the stopping day.

In my estimation there are two kinds of narrative in the Gospels. In the whole Bible actually. There are stories of people. Regular people with human foibles and feelings who engage with God--plead with God, learn about God, praise God, sacrifice to God... regular people living towards God in their regular selves, who are as a result of that engagement profoundly or incrementally changed. Or not. The other type of story has very little to do with the humans. They are stories of God reaching in lifting people up and breathing on them. Or as a friend you to say, the Spirit dances on their heads. That breath, that divine presence poured out unsolicited is unsurpassed in power and beauty. It crushes demons, satisfies our deepest hunger, decimates walls within and between us, is salve for our deep loneliness , enlivens our dead. One thing about those stories of the second kind. seems consistent. When God Breathes on us, or near us. When the Spirit dances, we, regular humans, run out of words, and generally—have no idea what to do.

Today’s invite us to be so paralyzed. Today we, with the disciples, are taken to the top of a mountain to be stopped, stunned ...by God. Probably not the God we’ve known since childhood. Not the God we’ve pictured in our minds eyes as we’ve prayed in church, the God we’ve sincerely and casually discussed and studied. No, today we are flooded. Literally. Overpowered thrown to the floor and left speechless. It is the day of Transfiguration.

Before we explore this story together, I just have to share with you a quote from one of my favorite authors, Annie Dillard. What is so compelling for me about her is that she is absolutely committed to telling the most naked truth possible about the church. In particular, she looks at what we profess as a church and notices that we couldn’t possibly believe those things we say, or surely everything church would look quite different. So in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard asks:

**Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets! Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews! For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return.**

At the transfiguration, I think that's what happened to the disciples. On that mountain on that day of Transfiguration I believe that Peter, James and John were thus drawn by God, and from that time forward would never and could never return. The literal details of that epiphany are not important. Getting caught up in modern psycho-scientific questions will not serve us well today. So let us set stop, set aside our fears of intellectual *in*-credibility, lower our guards, and listen to what Mark is trying to convey about that *incredible* day.

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peer said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say they were so frightened).

Now, stay with me. Or I should say, stay with Peter. He's admitting that he can't tell it right. Can't come up with words. He knows you think he's crazy. "But God...something. Light. Moses. Elijah. I offered to make a tent. I couldn't think of anything else.

While Peter is still generously offering to deploy his architectural gifts in their service, a bright cloud envelops them, a voice from within it speaking the words we heard at Jesus' baptism:

"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"  
Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

It is this astonishing event which is the turning point in the Gospel and a turning point in our church calendar. Let's think together for a spell about why.

Location, location, location. It is extremely significant that this story is set on a mountain top. Going to the top of a mountain was a common thing in Israel's stories.

Because mountains were regarded as ‘thin places’ - when God, the Divine, the Sacred - can be experienced. Spaces where the barrier between Heaven (which was thought to be up) and earth were more permeable. We recall that Moses received the law on Mount Sinai. It was on Mt Carmel where Elijah triumphed over the priests of the pagan god Baal, and on Mt Horeb where God spoke to him in the still small voice. On this Mountain, the Mountain of the Transfiguration Jesus is seen in his heavenly appearance accompanied by Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets. The whole story, right there. Salvation History, in a flash.

This mountain is placed in the center of this Gospel, and of our calendar, for this one primary reason. The view. The view from the Mountain Transfiguration. From here you can see the whole landscape in all directions.

Topography of Israel, is quite unlike ours in New England. It is actually a series of mountains from which you clearly see other mountains with a skyline that seems to extend forever. You can look out and see other countries. You can also see all of the roads and rivers in between these peaks. You can look down into the valleys and see detailed pathways that can literally be traced, like the course of a maze.

Mark invites us to stop and take in this view. From our stopping place here, on the Mount of the Transfiguration, he turns our gaze back, to what for Mark was the beginning of the story-- The baptism of Jesus. “This is my Son, the beloved.” We recognize him.

From there we are invited to trace Lord’s journey. We look back on Jesus’ direct encounters with women and men, his empathy and caring in actions and words. We look on Galilee and the party at Cana, calling the twelve, miracles with food and flesh, frightening storms political and natural, Bethsaida and the Blind man, and now Peter knowing the Christ as Messiah and this, the beginning of the end. God’s love incarnate, moving through human history.

In that same direction Mark also wants us to recognize similar revelations of God's love in Israel's past. Moses and Elijah represent all of the law and all of the prophets, and all the promises of the Covenant. It is the Story of Christ. It is the story of Israel. And now, this day, it is our transfiguration mountain. Our stopping day.

And as we stop we, we begin to take in our own story. From the mountaintop to which Mark has brought us, we look and see where *we* have been. We look from this “thin space” on the inception of our lives in God, our *baptisms*. And to trace our unique paths to this place, to this moment, through heart-break and victory, confusion and doubt, times of great learning and of great shame--being formed, gradually mastered by God, more and more, on our road to Transfiguration Mountain.

Back to the disciples, whose encounter on the mountain top simultaneously turns their gazes forward to another even more mesmerizing "transfiguration" . The adventure in which the disciples and Jesus are engaged is about to turn towards Jerusalem. There

events will transpire that will sear the human imagination. On that day to come, the covenant community of Israel will be drawn up into her Christ, as two strands, the ministry of Jesus and the History of Israel are woven together. Easter.

And so, here in our stopping day, all of us have this long range view in both directions. We have enough distance and “height” to see how the various features are related to one another. We can see these three central and glorious moments, the baptism, the transfiguration, and the resurrection.

And then, straining our eyes a bit, we can see *beyond* Jerusalem, a new city...made of gold. The New Jerusalem. On that day of THEE Transfiguration, all three strands will be drawn and held together on that final mountain. The risen Christ. The New Israel. And us. Our salvation. Ecstasy. We could try to imagine ourselves into *that* future, but there wouldn't be much point. Glory is beyond us, thankfully.

But let us return to our now. Here we stand, facing Jerusalem. Looking towards Easter. Knowing how our story ends, our certain ultimate end-- resurrection, inheritance, reunion. At least knowing it here (*pointing to head.*) When we gaze thusly upon Easter mountain, we can also see the valley filled with real people and mission in between. From up here we can see that there is no way of getting from the transfiguration to the resurrection without answering the call to be people of the cross.

We can see it from here, the general topography ahead, for our own journeys. Fears to overcome, demons to tame, masks to peel, acts to perform, mercy to extend and receive. We are following Jesus to and through the cross. We will walk with him for the next 40 days. We will walk together in a season of reflection, repentance and recommitment to the holy habits of those who are called to active service. We will step off this mountain top, quite soon. Wednesday in fact. Soon enough. Lent will come. But today is our stopping day. So, Stop. Drink it in. Feast your eyes. Treasure the view. – And do secure your helmets. *Amen.*