

In the liturgical calendar, today is the last Sunday before the season of Lent, a season of 40 days leading up to Holy Week and Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem of where he will be arrested, tried, mocked, and hung on a cross to die a gruesome death. The season ahead can be long, like a wilderness journey or experience, therefore, the message we are invited to consider today is... call it our pep talk and inspirational speech. Today’s scripture reading in Luke 9 is a message of possibility, freedom, hope, and boldness made possible through the Greatness of God.

Read Luke 9: 28-43

Heidi Neumark tells a powerful story of transfiguration. In her memoir *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* she details the transformation of the church she served for almost 20 years. Aptly named Transfiguration Lutheran Church, the community was struggling, barely surviving, when she arrived. Standing amid poverty and the myriad problems that can accompany such a demon- crime, drug abuse, lack of education and opportunity, lack of hope- Transfiguration mostly kept its doors shut tight to the world around it.

The work of Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit was example enough for Neumark. “When Peter and the others came down from the mountain,” she writes, “they found a father and a child grasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty... but they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.”

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus loses its power if it does not include that moment when Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain. The transfigured Jesus is changed, not in essence, but in the way he is seen; he acts in and for the world accordingly. Seeing Jesus differently means seeing oneself and others differently too. The congregation at Transfiguration Church understood: “But living high up in the rarefied air isn’t the point of transfiguration... (It was) never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.”

You all. This is what Jesus does. This is why God sent Jesus. To be a bright light guiding the way. To be the ultimate example of faithfulness to God and in such a way that we, God's children, Christ's disciples, are encouraged to follow and learn and in turn lead (and live) in the same way. Jesus came to be the human expression of "The Greatness of God".

This window behind me and in front of you all this morning was made in representation of the Transfiguration of Jesus. What do you see? I see "The Greatness of God".

I see it in that the transfiguration bears witness to the identity and redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus is declared to be the chosen Son of God and Jesus is prayerful and bold as he moves toward his destiny in Jerusalem.

Why is this important for us today? Just as the greatness of God shined through and transfigured Jesus on that mountain, today, the Greatness of God is fashioned in the distinctive identity and culture of the church of Jesus Christ, called to be faithful to the unique revelation and redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ.

Take a moment to notice the two figures to Jesus' right and left. This is Moses and Elijah, and it is as though Jesus is in conversation with them, creating continuity with the Christian church's Hebrew past as well as with the promised future of all of creation... bridging the greatness of God from the exodus through the end times. Moses is a figure that reminds us of the past—the exodus and the communal responsibility to teach the statutes and ordinances (the 10 commandments). Elijah is the prophet who will one day turn people's hearts back to the covenant. In Jewish thought, Elijah is associated with the end times. What does this tell us? Ever wonder with the development and becoming of the New Testament whether the Old Testament is still needed? Yes, Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets, not to abolish them. The greatness of God continues with the gift of Jesus.

As an extension of the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, our eyes can focus on Peter, James, and John at the foot of Jesus. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to pray with him on the mountain. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was faithful in spiritual disciplines that would bring him into the presence of God. And what does this tell us? It encourages us to likewise be people of prayer and resolute in our mission. Before Jesus did anything important, we read of Jesus taking time out to pray. Was he preparing? Was he pleading? Was he resting, getting fuel for what lay ahead? Yes, likely all of the

above. Jesus was one to be fully engaged in his relationship with God, especially when it came to prayer. These prayer-filled experiences empowered Jesus and set him on the right course knowing the greatness of God was with him every step of the way. Prayer can do the same for us.

Taking parts of the transfiguration does not get us all the way. We must consider the rest of what was witnessed on that mountain and what happened next as they returned to reality. The greatness of God witnessed in the transfiguration is found in glimpses of the kingdom of God embodied in congregations and communities expressing and standing for love and freedom, peace and justice, wholeness and fullness of life for all. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4, speaks of lifting the veil. Unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from seeing the full truth about God, hardening the people's hearts, Paul teaches that when one turns to Jesus, and wherever there is Jesus, the veil is removed and there is freedom.

There is a beautiful statue on the campus of Tuskegee University in Alabama, entitled *Lifting the Veil of Ignorance*. The statue is of Booker T. Washington standing over a slave and lifting a veil so that the light of education can strike his face. The slave, crouched down, has a book in one hand and is using the other hand to help lift the veil. His feet are poised to stand and move forward. The slave is looking out into the world with wide-eyed hope. The caption under the statue reads: "He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry."

What can we do today? Who can the church be today to lift the veil of ignorance and death so that we might live in the truth of God's redeeming love and in the work of God's transforming Spirit? I will tell you what we can do, who we can be- we can be an IMPACT people- pursuing change, being changed- in partnership with community mission agencies who are on the front lines of this work with all our neighbors. And we can do this, be this, not only when it is planned for us and put on neat boards to sign up, but we can be bold in our own initiative to engage all the time.

Maybe education isn't your thing. Maybe you have been an addict or have someone in your family who has been an addict, or a close friend. In Daytona Beach, Florida is a substance-abuse rehabilitation center named for two recovering alcoholics: Leon Stewart, an attorney, and Hal Marchman, a pastor. Released from the shackles of addiction, they teamed with others to

witness boldly to the hope of freedom from addiction for others. Marchman because the Walter Rauschenbusch of the city, reaching out to substance abusers in the Hell's Kitchen of the community. Myriads of people became unchained and enabled to reclaim their lives because the bold but loving intervention into their lives. With tough love and the message of the transfiguring gospel, Marchman became a catalyst for lights turning on, for shackles breaking, for habits overcome, and for lives converted.

We often see the transfiguration of Jesus as something singular (only for Jesus) or mysterious and mystical (only for a few chosen "holy" persons on a mountain far away and long ago). However, the transfiguration of Jesus is a vehicle for bearing witness to life-changing experiences for any and every believer who encounters the greatness of God.

As is the table, where our Lord and Savior offers us a feast of the bread of life and cup of salvation.