

“Transfiguration Experiences”

Based on Luke 9:28-43

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I have in my hand a small river rock that I picked up along the shores of the Illinois River that flows through the hills of eastern Oklahoma. There is a United Methodist church camp there called Camp Egan. The church I grew up in went there often for retreats. There is a place at Camp Egan where you hike up to the top of a ridge that overlooks a beautiful valley below. There is a clearing with some benches and a large wooden cross. It is an outdoor worship space. Hundreds of thousands of people over the years have gathered at that spot for worship, to experience the presence of God in the beauty of nature. People have had literal “mountain top experience” at that sacred site called Camp Egan. I am one of those people. And it’s hard for me to put in words the experiences of God’s presence I have had at Camp Egan. That’s how it is when we experience the presence of the divine. Words to describe the experience fail us.

Today we hear the story of when Peter, James and John had their mountain top experience, when they saw Jesus transfigured before them, having a conversation with Moses and Elijah. And then a cloud enveloped them. They heard the voice of God declaring Jesus as the chosen one that they need to listen to. These disciples had a mountain top experience like no other. It was so powerful that they couldn’t tell anyone about it, at least not yet. They couldn’t put the experience into words. But I can imagine that from then on out Peter, James and John had a completely new perspective about Jesus. They had seen a glimpse of who Jesus is in his fullness. No filters. It was a vision they could not articulate. Words to describe the experience failed them.

This rock I have from Camp Egan I picked up when I was not yet a teenager. On one side of it I have a drawing of a mountain. On top of the mountain is a cross. A huge sun is rising behind the mountain. And in the corner are three birds flying in the sky, representing the Trinity. This picture was an attempt to describe a mountain top experience I had at

Camp Egan. As I came back down the mountain and returned home, I took this rock with me. It has sat on a home altar I have maintained for years, along with other objects I have collected that mark “mountain top experiences.” These objects remind me of how God has revealed Godself to me in a number of different ways, in different contexts, for over four decades of my life. When we have these mountain top experiences we carry them with us for the rest of our lives. They shape our faith. They help form who we are as persons.



Can you imagine how Peter, James and John were impacted by their mountain top experience? Like I said, surely they looked at Jesus differently from then on out. When they saw Jesus in his resurrected body, the Transfiguration experience surely flooded their memories and reaffirmed for them that their mountain top experience was real. Seeing the transfigured Jesus shaped the faith of Peter, James and John. They came down the mountain carrying that experience. They were different

than the way they were before they went up the mountain with Jesus to pray.

What made my mountain top experiences possible as a kid was the result of the United Methodist Church. It was the church I belonged to that got me to that United Methodist owned camp. Not all my mountain top experiences have been at United Methodist church camps. But some have. Perhaps for many of us, and I would hope all of us, it has been through the church, particularly the United Methodist church, that the context for a mountain top experience was provided. Our church is a gathering of disciples around Jesus Christ, who from time to time gather on mountain tops, literally or figuratively, and experience the divine in powerful ways. We have these experiences as a church. And they are transformational experiences that shape our faith. That's part of the church experience.

That's what we heard about this morning. Peter, James and John, a tiny church gathered around Jesus, having their mountain top experience. The United Methodist Church has been that gathered community around Jesus for many of us where we have experienced the presence of God.

When Jesus, Peter, James and John came down the mountain, they walked into chaos and pain. While they had been up there on the mountain top, down below there was a father crying out for his son who was possessed of a demon. He had pleaded for the rest of Jesus' disciples to cast the demon out. They had the power to do so. We hear about it in Luke 9:1 where Jesus specifically gives his disciples the authority to cast out demons. They had the power but they could not do it. For whatever reason, we do not know, this father's son was still demon possessed and the disciples had failed. And this failure frustrated Jesus to no end. The disciples did not do what they had the power to do, to cast out the demon and heal this father's son.

I submit to you that in St. Louis earlier this week there were many loud cries for demons to be cast out: the demon of exclusion, the demon of legalism, the demon of deceit, the demon of hypocrisy. And the church failed to cast out the demons in our midst. The General Conference of the United Methodist Church had the power and authority

to cast out those demons, to provide space for healing, to move toward a path of reconciliation. We are now more divided than ever. The pain is deep. The demons are still present and active. And surely Jesus is frustrated to say the least.

“You faithless and perverse generation! How much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” Jesus was angry. Jesus was hurt. Jesus was frustrated. And he did not keep it bottled up inside but expressed his outrage. He didn’t just say, “I’m angry!” No, he named what he saw, a faithless and perverse generation. Those words are cutting. They hurt. They are offensive. And if it wasn’t for the fact that it was Jesus saying them, surely the crowd would have told Jesus what they thought of that statement and walked away. Maybe some did.

But even more, *Jesus* didn’t stomp off angry. Jesus’ anger and frustration didn’t close him off from the pressing need for that boy to have a demon cast out of him. There was healing and restoration that needed to be accomplished. There was work to do. Jesus wasn’t going to walk away from where the pain and brokenness was. He didn’t turn himself around and walk back up the mountain. And if the disciples couldn’t get the job done then Jesus was not going to let it go. He would cast the demon out and restore the son to his father. And that’s what he did. Nothing would stop Jesus from healing the suffering child.

Jesus didn’t walk away from General Conference either. In the midst of the chaos and pain Jesus was doing healing work. Jesus was in the hands of Bishop Malone, the bishop of the East Ohio Conference, who gently held J. J. Warren, a young, gay pastor who spoke passionately on the floor of the conference of the deep pain that the church he serves was inflicting on gay people and his call to be in ministry with people pushed to the margins by the church.



Jesus was present outside the conference, in the lobby of the arena. Gay and straight United Methodists were gathered there having worship, singing songs of liberation and receiving Holy Communion, the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the cup, while delegates walked by at the close of conference. That was the last thing those delegates saw as they left the arena to go home...an inclusive church gathered at the Lord's table. Jesus was there, in that communion service, casting out the demons, working a work of healing and restoration, and glorifying God.

That communion service was a glimpse of the church as it truly is, undistorted by exclusion and legalism and hypocrisy. It was the church of inclusion, of grace, and integrity. The church gathered for communion outside of the conference was a moment of transfiguration, a revealing of the church as it truly is, where all are welcomed at the Lord's table, where all are received as the beloved children of God, where the boundary markers are pushed back to make room for all who would come to the gospel feast.

Transfiguration moments can happen in places other than on mountain tops on retreat. Jesus can reveal himself in all kinds of places and spaces and among all kinds of communities. Suddenly, we find ourselves in the presence of the holy. Transfiguration moments can occur in spaces where people are grieving and hurting, but also loving, grace filled, and hopeful. I believe we can facilitate those transfiguration moments by continuing to gather together with friends, creating spaces of vulnerability and truth telling, humility and laughter, and with the wisdom to wait for the Spirit to stir and to reveal the presence of the holy in our midst. This is what we can do. We can cast out demons and reveal the glory of God through the power of love. May God help us to continue to create these kinds of inclusive spaces.