

Transfiguration Sermon

by Rev. Lyndon Kacick for the Joint Park County Methodist Parish

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Her name is Helen Ndume, and she was born in the Republic of Namibia, South Africa during the infamous Apartheid Era which meant that most things were different for black people than they were for white people including education. During that era young people fearing that they would never make any headway in changing the government, left the country in big numbers. Among them was Helen Ndume who at 15 years old with three of her friends, sneaked over the border to the neighboring country of Angola.

Unfortunately, Angola at the time was in the midst of a civil war where there were brutal attacks and killings. It was so bad that for Helen and her friend there was no safe place to run. She spoke of trying to sleep at night with bullets flying over her head. Eventually she would up be crossing into Zambia where she settled into a refugee camp where they built hospitals and schools and homes.

For the first time Helen began to study geography, history and math which she described as “eye opening”. Helen eventually found that education was her thing and years later found herself at the University in Leipzig, Germany, where she studied medicine.

When independence finally came to Namibia, she returned home and began an internship as the only ophthalmologist working at Oshakati Hospital for the state of Namibia. Back then there was a belief running through society that when a person got old they were expected to become blind and that this was God’s will.

Not willing to believe a word of it, Helen Ndume began “eye camp” in which she provided free service to the citizen of her country. In the first year, 82 people came to her clinic. When 82 people miraculously had their eyes worked on and received their sight, the word of Helen’s eye camp spread like wildfire and the next year they couldn’t control the crowd- they came in the thousands.

Helen stated, “You cannot just be in the private practice making money and knowing very well that there are thousands who are blind and they need help. No money in this world can pay for the happiness of someone who was blind and suddenly you take off that eye patch and they say, “Doctor I can see”. When they regain their sight, it changes their lives as you can imagine. Helen stated that “we have to have a culture of giving back to the less fortunate so that they can also be transformed like I was transformed.”

Helen in cooperation with SEE International has performed surgeries for over 35,000 men, women and children- free of charge. In 2015, she was awarded the first ever United Nations Nelson Mandela prize in recognition of her dedicated service to humanity. There my friends, is the gospel.

Giving sight to the blind. I wonder sometimes if that may have been in large part what Jesus came to do. It seemed that wherever he went he wound up restoring sight to the blind and by blind I’m not just referring to physical blindness. I’m referring as well to spiritual blindness, the kind of blindness that kept people from knowing what God is really after in their lives, that kept people from knowing who they might really become in relationship with God, that kept people from knowing that this Jesus who lived and worked in their midst was more than just an awesome teacher, an incredible healer, one whose power could even raise the dead, but as well God in the flesh, the way in which God so loved the world, the way in which God intended to bridge the chasm that had been created when human beings determined that their way was better than God’s way.

Maybe it was that kind of blindness that Jesus came to heal -the kind of blindness whose healing would completely change the way human beings understood the meaning and purpose of their lives, like Dr. Helen – the healing that would completely change the way human beings understood the nature and purpose of Jesus among us, not just in that day, but today.

To help us with this healing, to help us to see Jesus as we are supposed to see Jesus, good old Dr. Luke gave us the story of the transfiguration. It's a story that doesn't stand by itself incidentally. For to really understand it you have to look at what comes before it-- where Jesus was trying to settle a question with his disciples about who people thought he was. "Well, some say that you are John the Baptist and some say that you are Elijah, or one of the prophets of long ago come back to life." But then Jesus, true to character, never missing an opportunity to challenge people beyond their comfort zone, said to them,

"Well, what about you? Who do you say that I am"?

And bold Peter, answered "The Christ of God."

Peter confessed it even though he had no understanding of what it meant; he was blind to what this might mean. And I dare say that it was even more confusing how Jesus responded to that, with talk about how he was going to suffer many things and be rejected, and how those who would come after him, another way of saying those that follow in his footsteps, would have to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow, because it wouldn't be any good for man to gain the whole world and forfeit his very self, to protect a false self to the detriment of a true self.

I mean what? How do we understand some who advocates such "necessary suffering" as Richard Rohr calls it as the precondition to a better knowing, the discovery of a true self, the very meaning of discipleship? Jesus concluded,

"I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."

Could it be that he was referring to what Peter, James and John would discover in the coming days? The Kingdom of God would indeed come to them in a way they could never fathom, in a manner in which they would never expect.

Here's how good old Doctor Luke describes what happened. Eight days later- so about a week later after Jesus' prophetic announcement about how some would not taste death until they saw the Kingdom of God, Jesus took Peter, John and James up a high mountain to pray. Some say that they ascended up the famous Mt. Hermon (9232 feet high). And suddenly everything began to change. As Jesus was praying on that mountain, the scripture says,

"The appearance of his face was altered, and his clothes became this dazzling brilliant white."

In other words, he was transfigured before them which means according to the dictionary, "A complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state."

And suddenly there were two men standing there talking with him. Now these men were not ordinary men. They were none other than two of the greatest leaders the nation of Israel ever had. These guys were celebrities in the history of Israel, the red-carpet walkers. If you were in their company you were something. Moses and Elijah, the cameras would flash when these guys were around.

And Jesus was in conversation with them speaking about his departure which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Heaven was aware of the plan, you see. I wish I could have been privy to that conversation.

Well, Peter and James and John were kind of tired. You know that stage when you just can't keep your eyes open. But with this event, they suddenly became fully awake. And the scripture says, "they saw his glory".

And as they were about to break up the meeting, Peter said to Jesus, "It's good that we're here, let's make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." And Luke then throws in an important editorial. (Peter didn't know what he was saying).

Moses and Elijah weren't meant to stay and hang out, that was not their purpose in meeting with Jesus. In fact, the purpose in meeting with Jesus was not for Moses and Elijah at all, nor was it necessarily for Jesus, he knew who he was. No, the experience was meant for Peter, James and John-as we shall see.

And as if this was not enough, there suddenly could be heard a voice from heaven-that came out of the cloud-the Shekhinah (the dwelling or divine presence of God, as the Hebrews understood it.)"

"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him."

Now if that happened to you with the cloud and all, would you not be listening forever after that?

"And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days of what they had seen". Do you suppose that it would have taken some time to process an experience like that? I wonder if the whole thing never really made any sense to them until after the resurrection and the ascension and the coming of the Holy spirit. Until then, they must have been asking themselves: What in the world does this mean? I know I've asked that question over the years that I preached on Transfiguration Sunday. And I have come up with some rather interesting conclusions over the years.

For example, I used to think that this section of scripture was primarily about how we can never stay on the mountain top, but must eventually come down to the valley, to where real life is, and continue the ministry-which Jesus did when he reached the valley below and healed a boy with an unclean spirit.

There is always ministry to be done somewhere. Mountain top experiences are not meant to last forever. No one would doubt that such an experience would have been transformative for those disciples, that such an experience would be life-changing and potentially forever impact the way the disciples went about the ministry.

Or maybe it was about that Shekhinah, the cloud from which the voice came -speaking affirmation about Jesus-all that is well and good. However, I think that there is something else going on here, something a little more scandalous, something that the disciples might not fully understand until after the events of the resurrection as mentioned earlier.

So, what then was the meaning of all of this, why did Jesus allow these three men to witness this rather profound incident, to have this experience? Maybe, it was because as men who would carry on the ministry of Jesus beyond the resurrection, as men who would be responsible for the very inception of the Christian faith, through which thousands and eventually millions would be restored to God. If this was the case, they would have needed sealed in their minds forever, etched in their hearts, just who they were following along the way, just who they would eventually dedicate their lives TO, and give their lives FOR. Do you think?

I was never much of a fan of Superman growing up. When I moved to Montana, I think I became more of a fan because I heard that Lois Lane lived on Lewis street in Livingston. I think the reason why I never really watched Superman is because the character seemed too unbelievable to me. I mean really? The ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound? The ability to miraculously change clothes in a phone booth? (I wonder where he would change his clothes today.)

Reflecting on the life of Superman and what I think made him such a superhero to so many generations, what was so intriguing about this character, was the fact that he came disguised, all that power was disguised inside a lowly newspaper reporter, kind of dorky, very clumsy, but masked in all that power, all that authority, all that ability to rescue lives that were in imminent danger. I mean Clark Kent, just an ordinary guy until you put him in that phone booth—then he becomes Superman!

Jesus...just an ordinary guy until you put him on that mountain wherein is exposed the power and the majesty and the brilliance and the authority and the ability to rescue lives that were in imminent danger. And one who was himself talking to two larger-than-life biblical giants, one representing law and one representing the

prophetic ministry to Israel, the means by which God had elected throughout history to draw his people into a relationship with himself - now according to scripture, about to culminate in an event called Calvary- the departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Is it really possible to believe that God would actually do that? To believe that God would send Jesus, God's only son to restore a relationship with a broken, divided, violent, confused world? If we could somehow believe that Superman could hold two natures in one person, could we not also believe that about Jesus?

Because, I have found that when we have a tendency to focus exclusively on the human side, Jesus was just an ordinary man who died for a good cause. but when we have tendency to stress the other side, the divine side, we see him as untouchable, too bright, too radiant, too brilliant, too far away. No wonder the disciples were confused – until after the resurrection.

Nevertheless, it behooves us to hold the two natures in Jesus together, because if we can't get this about Jesus, we're never going to get it about ourselves, we're never going to fully understand the fact that we are indeed earthen vessels, as Paul calls us, in possession of a great treasure brought to us courtesy of the Holy Spirit, Christ not only with us, but in us.

You see, you might think that you are merely human, but if Christ lives in you, you are not merely human, in fact there is divinity coursing through your veins. Can you accept that? Can you accept that you are a child of the King? If, we can't accept the incredible story of transfiguration, we will never be able to accept that IN US is not only humanity, but divinity. And this is important because transfiguration should not only be a story about Jesus, one over which we just shrug our shoulders and walk away, --it should rather be story about you, a story about me, a story which we can become "fully awake" to the fact of God IN US,--- we have a different way of looking at things don't we? We have a very different way of relating to people, don't we? In fact, our way of looking at things and relating to people should look a lot like the way Jesus looked at things and related to people.

So, the call to us on this Transfiguration Sunday is to consider the fact that you are the Imago Dei—the image of God, which has been fully restored to you because of Jesus' "departure at Jerusalem," also known as the cross of Calvary, the place where Jesus died in order that our sins may be forgiven and we would be fully restored to God.

In light of this, you see, the appearance of your face has been altered; your clothes are dazzling white because you are now clothed with righteousness, in a right relationship with God. And the divine nature in you means something for you. It means something for your family, it means something about the transformation of your community, it means something for the advancement of the Kingdom of God, of the reign of God in this world. All you have to do is let it out -let your light shine. You're sure to impact some lives somewhere.

This story is at once a story about Jesus, but it is also a story about you. Please don't take that lightly. If you buy the fact that this is not just a story about Jesus, but a story about YOU, it will change the way you walk and the way you talk and the way you think and everything about you. It will transform and transfigure you – it will cause in you a "complete change in former appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state," It's important that we hear this church, because in us and through us, is the catalyst for the changing of the planet. I hope we can believe this and experience what this means going forward.

God's blessings to the United Methodist Churches of Park County! Lyndon Kacick