

**LIVING IN LIGHT**  
Ethel Hornbeck  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Luke 9:28-36**

*About eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" -- not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Beloved. Listen to him!" Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)*

And now, another story. Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called "Getting All You Can out of Your Shell." There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped "out of the blue" by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, "We . . . are . . . that!"

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: "So tell us, how would we become that tree?" "Well," said he, pointing downward, "it has something to do with going into the ground . . . and cracking open the shell." "Insane," they responded. "Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn't be acorns anymore."

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, which brings to a close the season of Epiphany, as it ushers in the season of Lent. It's an interesting hinge moment in the unfolding of the liturgical year, between light and darkness, birth and rebirth, with a whole bunch of wilderness, and suffering, in between. Today is a kind of doorway, then, that invites us into deeper seeing and reflecting, to more intentional being and perhaps, becoming.

Now, I confess, that the word—transfiguration-- is one of those fancy pants religious terms that I don't care for much at all. I think it obscures more than it reveals. In fact, the original Greek word in the story that gets translated as transfiguration—*metamorphóō*--is more commonly translated elsewhere as, simply, transformation. It turns up in the passage from the first letter to the Corinthians, also in today's lectionary readings, where Paul writes: "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another." (Acorns into oak trees!) The word also shows up in Paul's letter to the Roman Christians in one of my all time favorite passages, where he cautions: "do not be conformed to the ways of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

You may notice that the word "transfiguration" doesn't even appear in Luke's version of the

story—it shows up only in Matthew and Mark. Luke tells us simply while Jesus is praying “the appearance of his face changes, and his clothes become dazzling brightness.” It’s all quite mysterious, and to make matters even more curious, Moses and Elijah suddenly show up at the party.

Most often these days, reflection on this story leads into all kinds of high theological speculation about the nature of Jesus, his divinity. All that radiance. Moses and Elijah, powerful symbols of Hebrew tradition, the law and the prophets. But I do wonder if all our lofty theologizing, our penthouse high Christology, where we declare Jesus God and king and bow down in worship, if all that doesn’t serve to distance us, somehow from what it is the Holy is really up to here, what God might actually be inviting us to see and hear, do and become.

In the story here, God really only does one thing. God declares, “this is my Beloved, listen to him!” Not worship, not believe in, not pray to, but listen. Pray with, perhaps. *Pay attention* to this Jesus guy. And what is Jesus up to here? First off, he’s up the mountain. As, elsewhere we find him in the desert, on the water, on the beach, always seeking out wild and deserted places. Jesus stays grounded in creation, the first Incarnation. And, in those holy places, he prays, which is to say he makes space to listen deeply to the Holy. And he does so, often, with his friends in community.

The early church loved this story. Those earliest followers of Jesus, known as “People of the Way”, understood what we have largely forgotten, that “the way of Jesus” was a journey of liberation and transformation. All that heaven-and-hell-salvation business doesn’t get fully developed for another thousand years. This story in particular was heard as an invitation *to be transformed, in the way of Jesus*. Second century theologian Irenaeus, commenting on the transfiguration, famously said: “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.”

I don’t care for the word “transfiguration” but I, too, am drawn to this luminous Jesus, fully human, fully alive, Love on fire in human form whose very presence offers healing. Our story today doesn’t end on the mountain; it continues on with Jesus going back down to the crowds, where he encounters a frantic father who begs him to heal *his* beloved son. Jesus liberates the child from an unclean spirit, and returns him to his father. Transformed people transform people.

The poet Elizabeth Alexander writes, “we crave radiance in this austere world.” But I think too often we set our eyes on the austerity and miss the radiance. Which I think is all around us, if we pause to notice. In life, in death, in creation, in joy, in struggle. I see radiance especially in ordinary people—people of deep and abiding prayer; people who somehow manage to stay deeply grounded in love even in the presence of unthinkable suffering; and people who overcome unimaginable obstacles just to become the identity, the gender that God intended for them all along. People broken open into love very often shine. And transformed people do transform people, which I believe is the only chance we’ve got to transform the world.

This coming alive, waking up, *becoming fully what God intended for us to become* is the holy invitation before each of us, and it is a lifelong journey. Every spiritual tradition offers some version of this wisdom, and all of it can help us along the way. Our tradition gives us Jesus, and the marvelous instruction: listen to this guy! So, what if we all just did that? What if we really and truly listened to Jesus telling us to love one another, to care especially for those who suffer, to seek freedom for ourselves and others, to share freely, each according to their own unique giftedness. To live, not in fear, but trusting always in love, even when the clouds roll in. Because if we listen to the Jesus story, we will encounter a love that is stronger than fear, stronger than hate, stronger than all the unclean spirits, stronger even than death. What if, every now and then, we went *with Jesus*, up the mountain to pray. What might we hear and see? What might become of us, acorns that we are.

As we enter this season of Lent, this time of intentional reflection and listening, perhaps we might also take with us this question: what makes you come fully alive? We might even ask that as a community: where are we, collectively, most coming to life? As Howard Thurman, the great African American mystic and theologian insisted: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

I end today with one final story, from one of our most transformative contemporary wisdom teachers. Thomas Merton spent almost his whole his life seeking transformation in the monastery, in withdrawal from world, only to find it on a crowded street corner in Kentucky in 1958. He writes:

*In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*

May we all learn to live in that light.

Amen

<sup>1</sup> \*Source: Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, p 64-65

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