

The Transfiguration sermon I need (Matthew 17:1-9)

There is no "on the mountain" and "off the mountain."

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You know that Transfiguration sermon that exhorts us to appreciate the transience of mountaintop beauty only for a moment before we descend into the world's brokenness, joining Jesus in the way of suffering? I used to like hearing that sermon. I may even have preached it once or twice.

This year it's the last thing I want to hear. I don't need anyone to tell me to descend the mountain. I slid down months ago, and I haven't been able to find my way back up.

After the election, as hate crimes and hateful rhetoric increased, I became increasingly aware of the human tendency toward violence. I spent New Year's Eve dreading 2017. If I can't live in a glorious world where people are motivated by love and shine with grace, can't I at least spend one Sunday morning marveling at the glorified Jesus before being told to descend into reality?

Perhaps hoping to find moments of transfiguration within everyday life, I recently searched for "transfiguration" in my email archive. I unearthed 43 messages. While most were related to worship planning for eight years of Transfiguration Sundays, I also found these gems:

- Mary Ann tells me about finding her husband's baptismal certificate and realizing that his death, four years prior, happened on his baptismal

anniversary. I respond with my discovery that the [hymn](#) written in his honor has been listed under “Transfiguration” in the topical index of a hymnal. Her response: “Oh my! Don’t let me get started about Transfiguration. It is one of my favorite Sundays.”

- Wayne and I correspond about his mother-in-law’s illness, the Transfiguration sermon I’ve recently sent him, his trip to Prague, and Søren Kierkegaard. I’m still laughing over Wayne’s final claim: “Remember, there are days where I can make SK look like Woody Allen.”
- A series of messages in which a sweet chemistry post-doc named Liam and I, who have just met, tentatively get to know each other, unaware that we will end up getting married. We talk about Garrison Keillor, Scrabble, our parents, and Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (which I admit to quoting in nearly every Transfiguration sermon).
- A man I met at a mutual friend’s funeral tracks down my email address to ask if I recall what our alma mater’s [Transfiguration window](#) meant to our deceased friend. The request is gentle: “No need to get back right away on this . . . the mystery will keep.”

Discovering these messages reminded me of the complexity of friendships, the deep interaction between suffering and hope, and the surprise of grace.

And then I found the real treasure. My friend Mike sent me some thoughts as he prepared a Transfiguration sermon, noting that after the glorious, fear-inspiring vision, Jesus touches the disciples. This detail, which is only in Matthew’s account, reminded Mike of a difficult time in his life when a friend suggested that what he needed was “God with hands.” My response:

I’m not preaching on Sunday, but I like your point about how Jesus touched them when they were terrified. I was just reading in the [Christian Century](#) that the Hebrew word for glory (*kabod*) means “weight” or “heaviness.” This speaks to the *gravitas* of Moses’ experience with God on the mountain (and perhaps also to the *gravitas* of the Christian life--that we are called not just to be prosperous and happy, but also to bear the cross--whatever that means).

Maybe this means that when Jesus touches us, it's a heavy touch that acknowledges the suffering and sin intrinsic to the human condition--and yet, it is at the same time a healing touch that lets us know that we are not alone in the human condition. God is also in it with us, helping us bear the heaviness.

I think that's the sermon I need to hear this year. Not that there are two distinct types of moments in our lives--glory and suffering--and that we are called to immerse ourselves in the suffering for the sake of building up a later glory. Rather, through Christ, we are bound up into relationship with a God who is present with us in the glory and the suffering--which are always intertwined, this side of the eschaton. There is no "on the mountain" and "off the mountain." There are just the hours and days and years that we've been given. But they're filled with grace despite all the limitations.

This Lent, I'll be searching for that grace a little more than normal. I'm confident that I will find it.