March 3, 2019   
Luke 9:28-36   
Identity

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Luke 9:28-36 Common English Bible

About eight days after Jesus said these things, he took Peter, John, and James, and went up on a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him. They were clothed with heavenly splendor and spoke about Jesus’ departure, which he would achieve in Jerusalem. Peter and those with him were almost overcome by sleep, but they managed to stay awake and saw his glory as well as the two men with him.

As the two men were about to leave Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it’s good that we’re here. We should construct three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—but he didn’t know what he was saying. Peter was still speaking when a cloud overshadowed them. As they entered the cloud, they were overcome with awe.

Then a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!” Even as the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone. They were speechless and at the time told no one what they had seen.

Everything has changed, and we, like Peter, James and John, are lost and alone and afraid. Jesus gets all shimmery and shiny with these Old Testament heroes, Moses and Elijah, and it seems confusing. We even call this story a word that we rarely say, transfiguration. After this week in the United Methodist world, I can totally identity with this story. I am as confused as Peter, James, and John were.[[1]](#footnote-1) What I thought I knew to be true, is no longer true. How I understood the Church that I have been raised in makes me now ashamed and angry.

This is the story that we always hear the Sunday before Lent begins. It is this story in between Jesus’ baptism, with the similar words from the voice from heaven, and Jesus’ resurrection, with the messengers at the empty tomb and Jesus’ transformation. Transfiguration means to transform into something more beautiful or elevated. All week I wondered what I would say to you all after this week. Do I spend the next ten minutes thanking you all for simply showing up today? I want to do that. Thank you for not giving up and for continuing to say yes to the question asked at your baptism. “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” Resist. Do I spend the next ten minutes telling the LGBTQ members of our Greenland Hills family that they are a reflection of the image of God? That their LGBTQIA identity, orientation, or gender is sacred, valued, precious and beloved. In this house we celebrate and affirm the value of our LGBTQ siblings no matter what the UMC might say right now. This sanctuary is truly a safe place, open to all called to marriage and ministry. I want to cry in sadness and scream in anger. I want to get black tape and block out the words United Methodist from our sign out front because I am not that kind of a United Methodist.

In case you missed the news this week, the United Methodist Church legislated a solution for how the church should be in ministry with LGBTQ people. It didn’t go well. I kept thinking, I hope no one who isn’t sure if they love Jesus is watching this, or reading about this in the newspapers. Because Jesus is not anywhere in this. Jesus has already conquered the powers of sin, evil and death. Jesus has already declared that life wins, love wins, and God reigns. God alone decides who is in and who is out. That is good news.[[2]](#footnote-2) May we never forget that. We are Easter people and resurrection is our superpower![[3]](#footnote-3) John Wesley said our number one rule is do no harm. The United Methodist Church did harm this week. There are many decisions that we will be asked to look at and decide in the coming weeks. But today we need to come together and hold one another tight. We will move forward, and it starts with love.

There are two things that I want to highlight from our scripture. One is the Greek word that Luke uses. It is unique to Luke’s version of this story. While Jesus is all shiny, Moses and Elijah talk to Jesus about his departure. The word in Greek is exodus. Jesus’ departure, the cross, is exodus. It is about release and freedom. It is about an open future where God’s people live in freedom. Jesus’ death in Jerusalem rescued us all from our captivity just like the exodus with Moses and the parting of the Red Sea when the Israelites left slavery. An open future, that is about release and freedom. That is a pretty wonderful idea to think after this week in Methodist land.

Then the voice from heaven speaks and the words are similar to those spoken to Jesus at his baptism. But, this time they are spoken to the disciples rather than to Jesus and it ends with the command, “Listen to him!” Listen to what Jesus accomplishes in Jerusalem with his death. In Jesus’ death we see that God is with us and for us through all things. We see that God desires freedom and life for God’s people. That God loves us and all of God’s children more than we can imagine. That God will do absolutely anything, even death on the cross, to communicate this love and accomplish our release and our freedom.[[4]](#footnote-4)

God’s glory is known when the oppressed enter the promised land. God’s glory is known when “let my people go” becomes a reality.[[5]](#footnote-5) The world tells us that glory is in the winner, the elevated, the important, the powerful. God doesn’t vote at General Conference. God’s glory is known in freedom. Let my people go from bigotry and homophobia. Let my people go from racism and sexism and evil and violence. Let my people go from abuse. The Transfiguration isn’t all about Jesus’ glory. It is about our glory. It is about our identity as beloved, chosen children of God. It is about our freedom from a church that harms us. It is about our liberation as a church to do no harm, to do good, and to do whatever we can to grow closer to God.

Our identity at Greenland Hills is rooted in being a safe place, a sanctuary, where people can find good, loving soil, and grow closer to God and to their neighbor. Tesa Golden talked with her 8th grade son yesterday morning about the decision of the General Conference. She asked him what he thought and he said, “Why would we leave? They love us and it’s such a nice place.” That is our identity. May we listen to him. May we be a home for all God’s people. We are a church that believes in feeding the hungry, housing the immigrant, healing the sick, and preaching the Good News. We are rooted in Wesleyan tradition, grounded in Scripture, and committed to mission and ministry.

Peter wants to build shrines on the mountain for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Peter wants to ground them in this one place. He wants everything to stay the same. We do that too when we try to hold onto a view of Jesus that we are comfortable with, which usually also happens to look a lot like us. Today we have been given an opportunity to hold our images of God and Jesus lightly, not to limit the love and light of Christ.

Long ago in a small European village, there lived an old man whom everyone considered infinitely wise. Whenever the villagers needed advice, they came to the old man’s door and knocked. In the small village lived a number of rough young men. The young adults came to resent the old man, for he had so often been correct in his counsel. So, for once, they were determined to prove him wrong. The young ruffians caught a bird and decided to ask the old man whether the bird was dead or alive. If he said it was dead, the one holding the bird would let it fly away. If he said it was alive, then the one holding it would squeeze it to death before opening his hands. They went to the old man’s house and said, “Old man, we have an important question to ask you. Is this bird dead or alive?” The old man thought for a minute, then answered, “It’s all in your hands.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

We have to hold all things lightly because we have the power to crush or the power the give life. We have to leave room for God to work. Every encounter with another human being has the potential to be destructive or to be holy. When we encounter one another, we either give life or we deal in death. We deal in death when we criticize, belittle, misunderstand, ignore, boast, and insist on our own way. We give life when we notice, affirm, thank, listen to, rejoice with, an encourage others. We are transfigured and transformed by God’s grace when we are able to extend life to others. May we find our identity in Jesus and imitate his life, reflecting and expanding God’s glorious light to all the nations.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2019/03/transfiguration-c-listen-to-him/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://mailchi.mp/gatheringnow/lets-not-get-tired-of-doing-good-m-note-312019?e=50abee7df8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.facebook.com/carol.montgomery.92102?\_\_tn\_\_=%2CdC-R-R&eid=ARBlASlwdx-X\_wFNPA-fsQf8s\_UwJtVNssURt3BZ8NlKYIASxNCynO-qUnVUsMXj3mnc22fr3GLH4VBp&hc\_ref=ARRbbGIjCwXS1LKFOfb-Ub7RynKzXxLGiR1g7mCuMan39QDPT1oM8eS\_kklObLfy9PE&fref=nf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Much of this paragraph from http://www.davidlose.net/2019/03/transfiguration-c-listen-to-him/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5296 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This story comes from Robert Dannals in A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dannals , Robert. A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)