

Reflection for 14 February 2021— An Epic Love Story

Mark 9:2-9

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It's Transfiguration Sunday. As a friend of mine says: This is "the day when preachers either try to explain 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,' assign the sermon to another member of the staff, or wisely take a 'well-deserved' day off. After all, who wants to try to explain one of the strangest stories in the gospels?"ⁱ

I do that around Ascension Day, because it is so hard for me to take seriously. But I am drawn to the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, in all its mystery. As American pastor Thom Shuman suggests, "Maybe what we are presented with is a love story. It is a story about God's love for Jesus, as God once again reminds Jesus, who is about to begin the most difficult part of his ministry (and his life), that [he] is the Beloved, he is the One who finally gets what God is trying to do and is willing to join in the great adventure called redemption."ⁱⁱ

It is also a story of the love Jesus has for the disciples, especially these three who seem to be especially close to him, yet often seem so clueless. They are awestruck at meeting some of their legendary heroes in the persons of Moses and Elijah. And they are so distracted by the awesome visual effects of this moment, that their groupie instinct on being in on it, is to prolong the experience a bit by creating some sort of tents to shelter Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. Maybe have a mountain top prophet festival.

The notion so surprised Jesus that he was speechless. But a repeat of what happened at his baptism rescued him from the moment. A voice came from a cloud over them, saying, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' This time, the voice was speaking to the disciples, which must have really shaken them.

Then suddenly, it was just the four guys who had hiked up the mountain. No need to think about prophet pup-tents for Elijah and Moses, who had just vanished into thin air. (pun intended)

So, the exhilarating transfiguration experience is over and Jesus orders them on the way down the mountain "to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead." (vs. 9) This is not a casual request. He orders them not to share the most amazing experience of their life thus far, until after what will be by far the more amazing experience of their life—his resurrection.

If we read vs. 10, past today's last verse, we learn that the disciples did what Jesus asked. "So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean." Indeed.

So many things thrown at the disciples (and us) in this short story. But we know the ending of the story, the part about Easter. And we will hear of the remainder of Jesus' ministry over the next six weeks of Lent before we experience that story.

Meanwhile, what happens after the Transfiguration is the most significant part of this love story. It is about the love that Jesus lives and shares with those he encounters “in the valleys of real life, where people are hungry for hope as well as food, where people thirst for justice as well as clean drinking water, where people are mocked and ridiculed because of their mental illness, where people are going to argue if they deserve the title of GOAT, and where those who talk about how good it is to be with Jesus on the mountaintop decide it is not worth it to walk with him through the valley of death.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That’s the message I take from this story, that we are called—not to live from mountain-top to mountaintop experience—but to live in our daily lives with love and joy. In my family of origin, there was so much emphasis on the highlights, the best parts of our lives. We were always anticipating the next wonderful experience, the next concert, the next award, the next vacation. We didn’t appreciate the life we were living while we were looking toward “the next thing.”

Christians who focus their whole life on getting into heaven remind me of that. So focused on eternity that they aren’t present to the gift of the life we have been given here and living it fully in ways that love those around us.

The world has had another challenging week. Many more deaths from Covid-19, a serious earthquake in Japan, and a colossally disappointing verdict in the second impeachment trial of Donald Trump. Not unexpected, but nevertheless disappointing.

Theologian Walter Bruggemann says the church is called to prophetic tasks in times like this. And the prophetic tasks of the church are:^{iv}

- 1) to **tell the truth** in a society that lives in **illusion**,
- 2) to **grieve** in a society that practices **denial**, and
- 3) to **express hope** in a society that lives in **despair**.

All of these movements are captured in our worship life together through the year.

In the aftermath of mass shootings in the U.S., the common wisdom has been “this isn’t the time to talk about it.” They don’t talk and nothing changes. Conflict in the church can be similar. We want to be nice people and so we avoid addressing inappropriate behaviour and it keeps happening.

When someone gets a devastating medical diagnosis, after our gossip mill spreads the information, our response is often to revert to: “Don’t talk about it!”

Do you hear both sides of that truth? “Yes, I know. But don’t talk about it.” We know, but we don’t want to know, we don’t want this to be true, and so we say the only thing we can say—don’t talk about it. If you don’t talk about it, it isn’t happening. This is what Joan Didion called magical thinking, the idea that not knowing, not planning, not accepting, will make something not real.

Didion is a literary journalist and novelist, who explores the disintegration of American morals and cultural chaos; the overriding theme of her work is individual and social fragmentation. After her husband died in 2004, she wrote a book called [*The Year of Magical Thinking*](#) as part of her grieving process. For her, magical thinking is where—if you don't talk about, make plans, and accept what is happening—you can pretend something is not happening.

And so we come back from the doctor with a word that is hard to hear. Our loved one did not get good news. Often they will be much more practical than we will. All around them are voices saying you'll be healed, it's probably nothing, don't let this be true, you're ok, maybe a cure will be found soon. Inside, she is coming to terms with "I probably won't see my grandchildren again." Because travel restrictions are keeping us close to home and the friend's diagnosis means she may not outlive the pandemic.

Friends, Brueggeman tells us our role as church in those times is to be able to bear the truth when we'd rather live in illusion. This does not mean giving up hope—but it can mean being the one who is capable of hearing someone talk about what is going to happen, who can accept that the truth is hard, but denial is harder.

Hear me carefully. Our task is not to get ahead of our loved ones or friends, but to walk with them.

When someone we know is walking through the valley of death, our privilege as part of their faith community is to walk with them. To practice the beautiful art of being present in the present. We don't need to worry about what to say, we simply offer our presence. People don't remember our wonderful advice or promises of prayer, they remember our presence. The hugs, the casseroles, the soup or muffins, a load of laundry done, or dishes washed, the simple actions of a prescription picked up and groceries delivered, or snow shovelling done in the dark by an unknown neighbour, and the phone calls to see what's needed. THOSE are the things that stick. Those are the things that say, "I love you."

When we are walking with someone toward the lonesome valley, our role is not to call them back, not to push them forward, but to walk with them where they are.

It's a commitment to be truthful while living in a society that craves falsehood. It's a commitment to mourn and grieve when everyone around you is in denial. And it's a commitment to proclaim hope in God when the prevailing mood is despair.

At a Five Oaks meeting a few years ago, I remember being stunned when someone shared an email from a faithful volunteer who was dying. She had written a letter to all her circles of friends to say goodbye and it began with a quote by Rumi, "We're all just walking each other home." I love that quote.

Sometimes, though, we'd rather not talk about it. We'd rather not be reminded of how hard the road is going to be. And so our loved one might try to sit us down and tell us something very important, or share their wishes about their death, and we say you're

going to be fine, there'll be time to talk later, I'll take care of it, you don't have to worry. Don't talk about it.

Friends, let's talk about it. When you're the one privileged to walk with someone all along the way, even to the last moments, and they are about to cross over, let's talk about it. Or rather, you and I listen while they talk. We don't have to be afraid of those conversations.

They'll be hard, but they'll be beautiful. Do you remember how afraid you were to say "I love you" the first time? And how much richer and more beautiful your life is because you mustered the courage to say it? It's like that. It's hard, but beautiful, to hear and receive those last conversations. They might just be the most important ones you'll ever have.

Some cultures do this better than ours. What can we learn from them? Death separates us, and a stiff upper lip doesn't really get us through the deep emotions. You will experience those emotions, and they will come out. They can come out now, when there's a lot of support and understanding, and/or, they can come out later. In my personal experience that's a both-and, not an either-or.

Our task is to grieve rather than live in denial when we are going through those deep valleys. The language of lament is largely foreign in our culture. It's present in the Bible in the psalms, when people could give voice to their strong emotions of fear, anger, grief, confusion, feelings of abandonment, and offer them to God.

When people we love have died, it's ok for us to express our own sorrow, to acknowledge our grief and pain, to mourn. When events in the world cause collective grief and mourning, it's ok for us to acknowledge those honestly, and to grieve. I cried for three days after the U.S. election in 2016.

When our church is fearful about its own future, it is important to talk and get our feelings on the table. And the conversation has to continue. It is not a one-time thing. And it calls for discernment and creative thinking. That is why we are engaged in this intentional interim time together. But we often don't allow ourselves enough time to grieve the things and people we have lost. Lament is important in faith life and some of us are going to spend some time in lament during Lent this year. One opportunity is the Women's Bible Study led by Judy Jefferson. Details are in the bulletin.

Bruggemann says there's another prophetic task for the church, and this is found in the Transfiguration story. Jesus is with his closest friends, those who have walked with him through Galilee, who have been with him for miracles and healings, for teachings and parables. They see him transfigured, talking with Moses and Elijah, shining like the sun, they see him in the fullness of who he is, and they are overwhelmed. They want to stay, they want to worship, they want to linger. Peter's offer to build shelters so they could do that, before his final journey into Jerusalem and to the cross, may even have sounded tempting to Jesus.

In Celtic spirituality, we would say that they were in a thin place. A place where the bounds between earth and heaven are thin and we experience divine encounters.

In the midst of that experience, they hear the voice of God, reminding them of what God had said a few years earlier when Jesus himself was in the Jordan River being baptized by John—this is my son, whom I dearly love, who “gets” my dream for the world.

When the whole world is in despair, as it feels like it is right now, Brueggeman says our task is to live as people of hope. “Resurrection specialists,” as Alexa Gilmour called us in the Regional Celebration of Ministries service in November. Resurrection specialists. In this story about Jesus we see a glimpse of **why** we can hope. We see Jesus as he will be forever, and we are reminded of God’s great and deep love for him. Jesus embodies what he’s been saying—that God is love, that God loves, that God loves us with an everlasting love. That we are invited to love, too.

On the mountaintop, Jesus lives, for a moment, into what will be true forever, that he will shine like the sun. Some think the Transfiguration, with Elijah and Moses present, was a glimpse of the post-Resurrection Jesus.

When the world is in despair, when leaders no longer inspire what is best in us but thrive on chaos and lies for their own profit, and call out what is the worst in us, when it’s easier to believe our generation truly cannot leave a better world for our children and grandchildren, then we understand why people live in despair. Sometimes if this is all there is, especially during times like this pandemic, we can understand the despair and hopelessness people experience.

But this is not all there is, and we are people of resurrection. That is where the Lenten journey leads us. We are people who trust that what we have seen in Jesus is the truth, and that’s why we can live as people of hope in a world whose appetite for despair is insatiable. We are people of the resurrection, and we trust Jesus when he said he would go to prepare a place for us and then come again to take us there. We trust God when God says that God dearly loves Jesus, and we can trust Jesus when he says that God truly loves **us**.

In the words of Walter Brueggeman, which I mentioned many paragraphs ago:

- 1) We’re called to live in truthfulness when the world around us lives in an illusion;
- 2) we’re called to grieve when our society lives in denial,
- 3) and we’re called to express hope when all around us is a culture of despair.

We can live into this because we follow One who himself is truth, who is no stranger to grief or death, and whose resurrection is the ground of our hope and our life.

ⁱ Thom M. Shuman in a Facebook post about the Transfiguration on 8 Feb 2021

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} The framework of this reflection around Brueggeman’s three prophetic tasks was inspired by Claire Clyburn’s sermon on PRCL on 8 Feb 2018.