

OVERWHELMING

Matthew 17:1-9

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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There are moments in our lives when the routine and the humdrum give way to overwhelming experiences that catch our imagination and wonder by surprise. Moments when the curtain of the ordinary parts and we know, without a doubt, that we have been delivered into the realm of mystery and holiness.

I can name some moments like that from my own life, and I expect you can do the same. Perhaps the first in my memory was a visit to the World's Fair out in Flushing Meadows in 1964 where I saw for the first time Michelangelo's striking *Pieta*, the sculpture of Mary holding the crucified Jesus. The lines were long, and the viewing took place along moving walkways that kept one from standing and studying the sculpture for very long. I stood in those long lines four or five times that day, for I sensed somehow that I was in the presence of art of the rarest quality. It was overwhelming.

Years later there would be a different kind of epiphany, as I stood trembling in the delivery room when our son was born, overcome by the grace and the gift afforded us in such a moment. It would be repeated five years later when I held our daughter moments after she was born. Those two moments were overwhelming spiritual experiences for me.

There have been others. The first time I drove out of the tunnel into that outdoor cathedral that is Yosemite Valley. One perfect summer day on the island of Iona, framed by the most moving services of morning and evening prayer in the old abbey. One warm March morning atop a rise on the Serengeti plains of Tanzania, with millions of wildebeest in a procession stretching as far as the eye could see. An ethereal choral anthem that transported me to another realm than the one I had inhabited just moments earlier. More than a few hours spent with families after the deaths of their dear ones, when I have been blessed by the privilege of hearing intimate stories about the way faith and hope were imparted from one generation to another. In all such moments I felt overwhelmed by grace and mystery and holiness.

The transfiguration of Jesus was something like that... and yet it was nothing like that. It was a special, unforgettable moment for the disciples who accompanied Jesus up the mountain. It was the quintessential mountaintop experience, I suppose. And yet words fail to describe, minds cannot comprehend the significance of that moment in which Jesus was transfigured before his disciples and appeared with Moses and Elijah in the clouds. This was more than just a special experience. It was, as a colleague once

described it, a slice of heaven.¹ It was a moment when the mystery opened itself long enough to allow a glimpse of the eternal.

So, this text is a hard one for preachers. To what can we compare such an incomparable experience? The idea of trying to find suitable parallels in human experience is inappropriate. Applications, examples and exhortations trivialize!² We do better, I believe, simply to follow the disciples up the mountain, glimpse something of the moment in time within which the transfiguration occurred, and then stand back in awe of its mystery and power.

We have a hard time describing the “what” of this story: what happened? What does it mean? Even harder to grasp is the “why” of it: why do Matthew, Mark and Luke all remember and tell this story? Why is it so important? A clue, I think, can be found as we look at the story’s placement in the gospel. When does the transfiguration happen? Matthew, like Luke and Mark, places this story immediately after what scholars call Jesus’ first prediction of his passion (the suffering and death that await him in Jerusalem). The disciples had resisted that prediction intensely. So, the placement of the story here may well be strategic, not unlike the earlier placement of the story of Jesus’ baptism.

After submitting to the baptism of preparation and before beginning his public ministry, Jesus received heaven’s confirmation as Son of God. [The voice from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved.”] Here, [just] after speaking of his coming passion and before turning toward Jerusalem, Jesus receives heaven’s confirmation again.³

This time, though, three of his disciples also hear the voice from the cloud, which echoes, “This is my Son, my Beloved,” and then adds, “Listen to him!” Listen to him! All his talk of death which you rejected, it is true. This is my Son. Listen to him! The One who announced to you that he must suffer and die and be raised is indeed God’s Son and is to be obeyed. Listen to him! The presence of Moses and Elijah, probably representing the law and the prophets, confirms the truth that such has been God’s plan from the beginning. It was a defining moment for the disciples, as it was for Jesus.

One does not imagine, says Fred Craddock, that these disciples were able immediately to join suffering and death to the Son of God and Lord, as evidenced by Peter’s fumbling suggestion that they take a selfie in that moment and pitch some tents and just stay right there for a while. But they now had been given the two main ingredients for a faith to proclaim once power and clarity came to them.⁴

We wonder if things like this really happen [says Patrick Willson]. And if we mean by...things like this...bleached gowns glowing with unearthly incandescence

¹ Ted Wardlaw used such a description in a sermon on this text delivered at the Central Presbyterian Church of Atlanta on March 1, 1992.

² Cf. Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Commentary*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990, 132

³ Craddock, 133. He speaks of Luke, but Matthew’s emphasis is the same.

⁴ Craddock, 133.

and visions of Jesus and Moses and Elijah, the most we can say is that though the disciples report seeing it, we have not seen, at least not in that way. But if we mean by, “do things like this really happen?,” moments when the fog lifts and we are able to see things clearly; when the most ordinary stuff of our lives glows and shines with some extraordinary denseness and reality; when time slows down or stops altogether and we enter a timeless place; when all the clamoring noise falls silent and we listen for what is truly important; when the disparate facts of our existence fall somehow into place and we see, if only for an instant, how things fit together and how they truly are; when something in us is roused simply to say, “yes, yes;” then, indeed, we do say, must say, “yes, yes, things like this do happen.”⁵

It happens for Jesus, for the transfiguration confirms who he is and assures that the announced path before him is not only according to the law and the prophets but also God's will for him. It happens for the disciples, too, because this experience tells them that Jesus is God's Son, and that he is to be obeyed as he instructs them on the way to Jerusalem and to his death.

And what the Transfiguration confirms for these disciples, who will soon encounter conflict and turmoil that will seem to derail if not bring to an end their hope in this Jesus, is that those very conditions are not obstacles to God's purposes, but an integral part of the journey toward God's will.

This is a mountaintop experience [says Craddock] but not the kind about which persons write glowingly of sunrises, soft breezes, warm friends, music, and quiet time. On this mountain the subject is death, and the frightening presence of God reduces those present to silence. In due time, after the resurrection, they will remember, understand, and not feel heavy. In fact, they will tell it broadly as good news.⁶

Some months ago, I shared with some of you Fred Craddock's wonderful story about a remarkable evening during his childhood when his father called him out into the backyard of his home in Tennessee. Fred's father asked him to lie down in the summer grass beside him and to look up at the stars... and then he asked, “Son, how far can you think?”

And Fred said, “What?” His father asked again, “How far can you think?”

“Well, I don't know what you mean.” “Just think as far as you can think up toward those stars.” And so, said Fred, I screwed my imagination down, and I said, “I'm thinking... I'm thinking... I'm thinking.”

⁵ Patrick Willson, “Praying with Your Eyes Open,” a sermon on this text preached at the St. Stephen Presbyterian Church of Fort Worth, Texas, March 1, 1992.

⁶ Craddock, 135.

His dad said, “Think as far as you can think now.” After a while Fred said, “I’m thinking as far as I can think.”

“OK then. Drive down a stake out there at that point. In your mind, drive down a stake. Have you driven down the stake? That’s how far you can think?”

Fred said, “Yes, sir.” And his father said, “Now, Fred, what’s on the other side of your stake?”

Fred said, “Well, there’s more sky.” And his father said, “Then, you’d better move your stake.”

They spent the whole evening out there moving Fred’s stake. Remembering that night years later, Fred said, “It was a crazy thing to do, but I will never thank him enough for doing it.”⁷

The Mount of Transfiguration was a stake-moving place for the disciples; for out of the aura of clouded mystery, they suddenly saw further than they had ever seen before. And the past and the future stood before them with startling clarity.

Sometimes amid the ordinary struggles and routines of life the curtain is parted, and we find a slice of heaven. And how grateful we are when it happens to us. A pastor colleague shared the story of a pastoral visit she paid to a retired minister-member of her congregation whose mind and memory had been ravaged by Alzheimer’s disease. She went to take him communion. They shared some aimless small talk, but then after a while she read some scripture, and finally set the elements before him. In a momentary fit of rage, he said, “What is this?” Then he shouted, “What is this?” My friend said she was searching her mind for some way of explaining, when he answered his own question: “This is the joyful feast of the people of God,” he said, and then lifting his eyes to the heavens, he prayed, “Almighty God, we thank You for this supper shared in the spirit with Your Son Jesus....” And for a few moments, at least, he was re-connected with grace and standing in the presence of glory.⁸

We all live for such glimpses, do we not? It’s not so much a voice we long for, not the dazzling lights or the mysterious clouds. What we long for is a glimpse, some stake-moving moment when we find faith and discipleship encouraged, undergirded. Yet while we may long for it, such a glimpse cannot be commanded; it always comes as a gift. Annie Dillard said, “We cannot cause light; the most we can do is try to put ourselves in the path of its beam.”⁹ But that much we can do. Put ourselves in a place where God’s light and truth can shine on us, claim us, call us, help us move our stake... we can do that much. In many ways, I suspect, that’s why we come here Sunday after Sunday... because we long for such a glimpse. It’s why we come. It’s why we come.

⁷ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. Mike Graves and Richard Ward, St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001, 123-124.

⁸ Joanna Adams told this story at the January 1988 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Atlanta.

⁹ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, New York, Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974, 33, paraphrased.