

Luke 9:28-36
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
March 2, 2025

Listen to Him

So what is this story (the Transfiguration passage in Luke 9:28-36) about?

What happened on that mountain is better experienced than written about. It's a little like asking me what happened on my first date with Terely. I mean, I can tell you the events, like we saw a movie. But describing how I was falling head over heels for her, how her voice, her body, her mannerisms, her energy, her movement, her beauty, her braces! (we were young!) completely captured and enthralled me? I don't have words.

Some things must be experienced, not just described.

The Transfiguration is one of those moments. The text tells us simply: "He was transfigured." Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, and before their eyes, Jesus changed — fully himself, yet suddenly more, suddenly "other." And then, shockingly, he is talking with Moses and Elijah — who had been dead for centuries.

Moses, the lawgiver from 14 centuries ago, represents the Law, Elijah from eight centuries ago, the Prophets. Together, they sum up the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. And now, they stand with Jesus, passing on God's great project of renewal. A new Moses, leading a new exodus. A new Elijah, bringing a prophetic message.

Peter, overwhelmed, tries to make sense of it: "It is good to be here!" (Great! Stop there, Peter!) But he continues: "Let's build memorials — one for each of you!" Maybe a gift shop, guided tours?

Then, God gives immediate "feedback: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Not Moses. Not Elijah. Listen to Jesus.

That is what happened. But why does it matter?

1. A Nonviolent Bible

God's voice makes it clear: Listen to Jesus. His voice takes priority over every other voice in Scripture. If we're not reading the Bible in the light of Christ, we're missing the point, and may be better off not reading it all!

Brian Zahnd puts it this way:

Jesus is the true and living Word of God. He is what the Law and Prophets were pointing to. The Old Testament tried to say what Jesus says perfectly. God couldn't say everything in a book, so He said it in a person. Jesus is what God has to say.

The Law and Prophets were like the moon and stars, giving light in a dark world. But with Jesus, the sun has risen. Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, are eclipsed by the full glory of God in Christ.

This changes how we read the Bible. Jesus saves Scripture from becoming just another violent religious text. Ritual sacrifices, Torah laws, killing in God's name — all of it must be re-evaluated in the light of Jesus.

Wars of conquest, slavery, capital punishment, genocide — the Bible has been used to justify all of these. But Jesus does not endorse them. If you want to do violence, you will find a Bible verse for it. But if you seek healing, you will find the words of Jesus.

Rachel Held Evans put it this way:

Sometimes, the best question is not "What does it say?" but "What am I looking for?"

So listen to Jesus.

Listen to the part about liberation for the oppressed. Good news to the poor. Sight for the blind. Love your neighbor as yourself. Care for the stranger. Love your enemy.

A Bible read through the lens of Jesus brings life, leads to justice, and reveals the true heart of God.

2. A Transformative Aspiration

What is God's goal for your life? Paul puts it best:

To be conformed to the image of his Son.

Notice what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say "Be biblical."

The goal of the Christian life isn't to be biblical — it's to be Christ-like.

We don't just want biblical justice. That could lead us back to vengeance. We want Christ-like justice: restorative, healing, redeeming.

We don't want biblical gender roles,—cherry-picking stories to reinforce toxic masculinity or oppression. We want Christ-like humanity, where all are honored and loved.

We don't want biblical politics, where power justifies oppression. We want Christ-like politics, shaped by the values of God's reign: mercy, forgiveness, peace, grace.

What turned the world upside down in the first century? A group of people proclaiming that God is a crucified and risen Savior—a God who extends mercy even to those killing him.

This is why we, as a church, fight racism. Why we work to dismantle white supremacy. Why we confront our own complicity in oppression. Why we work hard to heal our own unresolved inner conflicts and traumas. Why we ask hard questions about our present and future as a church. Why we invest in new initiatives that might fail.

Because we want to be like Christ.

Which is the same as saying we want to join God in the renewal of all things. And to do that, we must listen to Jesus.

3. A Trustworthy God

The Transfiguration puts a fine point on what the New Testament tells us: God is like Jesus.

Paul says in Colossians:

Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

Hebrews says:

Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being.

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

When I speak about Christian faith with those who are seeking, telling them God is like Jesus is almost always met with “Well if that's the case, I'm interested.”

We have a new way of knowing God, and it's not a book, it's a person.

A book was not in the manger. A book was not on the cross. A book did not rise from the dead. A person did.

There's a story in the Bible where Jesus and his followers need lodging. They knock on a Samaritan village's door. The villagers refuse to let them in.

James and John know the Bible. They know what Elijah did to those who rejected God. So they say: "Jesus, should we call down fire on them?"

Sounds biblical, right?

But Jesus rebukes them.

"Do you know what spirit that comes from? I came to give life, not take it."

In that moment, James and John realize: This is different. This is not like Elijah. This is new. Moses could stone sinners. Elijah could burn up enemies. But for a Christian, that doesn't matter because we follow Jesus.

This is why the Transfiguration is so important.

- A Nonviolent Bible — Jesus is what God has to say.
- A Transformative Aspiration — Our goal is to be Christ-like.
- A Trustworthy God — Jesus reveals the true nature of God.

The Transfiguration doesn't last forever. Jesus leads them back down the mountain. It would be easier to stay in the light, above the suffering. But faith is lived in the world.

Richard Rohr says:

The disciples first respond to the Transfigured Christ with fear. In our global time of crisis, this is where many of us are today. The disciples mirror the itinerary of the spiritual journey: we start out with many concerns, fears, and worries. Our minds and hearts are all over the place. But Jesus comes, touches them, and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." When the three disciples raise their eyes, they see nothing but one image: Jesus. Their lives have become fully focused and simplified on the one thing that is good, the one thing they desire, and the one thing that is necessary. What a moment of grace and encouragement!

This is the good news of the Transfiguration:

- In a world full of fear, Jesus stands with us.
- In a world of war, oppression, and violence, Jesus remains.
- In a world where it seems death has the final word, we declare: it does not.

God's realm will not be stopped. God's light will not be extinguished. So today, defiantly, insistently, we say: Happy Transfiguration Sunday.

Amen.