

God of Light, shine on these words, that we might see your glory this day.
Amen

A few weeks ago, a colleague asked me what my favourite Holy season of the year is. I didn't have to think about it, I quickly responded Pentecost and Transfiguration.

"Transfiguration? Really?" she responded "most preachers I talk to would do anything to avoid Transfiguration Sunday! Why is it one of your favourites?"

For that, I didn't really have an answer. "Perhaps," I said, "because it reminds me of a hiking trip I took with a group of grade 7 students. We were sojourning up Mount Seymour in Vancouver and the group I was with took a wrong turn and became separated from the others. As we sat on boulders, trying to discern our next best steps (there was no cell phone coverage way up there, beyond the city skies). I looked out at the vista and quieted myself. In the quiet, I could hear the others from our larger group. It's hard to completely muffle the sound of 50 grade 7 students!!

I encouraged the others to listen and look towards the voices – there, across a small valley and up a short hill, were our hiking mates, which we thankfully rejoined. The setting of the transfiguration story reminds me of this trip, or perhaps it is the trip that reminds me of the Transfiguration story – both the work and wonder of climbing a high mountain, and the invitation to listen, call me to a place of gratitude."

But it wasn't until I read a commentary on the text by James C. Howell, United Methodist Pastor and adjunct professor of Preaching at Duke Divinity School,ⁱ that I truly came to understand my passion for this annual Christian celebration.

There are lots of ways to approach today's text. We can reflect on the season of Epiphany and how it began with the light of a star and concludes with Jesus bathed in dazzling raiment; and how that light of hope continues to shine in and through us, even now.

We can consider the relationship between the story of Jesus asking his disciples "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" and the revelations of the transfiguration.

In the first, Jesus doesn't deny any of the speculation, and directs his disciples to "tell no one about me". Then, only a few weeks later, Jesus takes some of these disciples, including Peter, on a hiking trip up a high mountain, where he is revealed to be neither Elijah, nor a prophet like Moses, but God's beloved; affirming Peter's recognition of him as "the Messiah". We could ask, how and where do we recognize Jesus?

We could talk about the whole concept of how mountains denote holy places in our scriptures – a place where God is found; which gives way to the concept of having a "mountain top experience"; and we could explore what constitutes such an encounter with the Holy, today.

We could discuss the similarities and differences between Moses going up the mountain and requesting to see God's glory but being required to turn his back, instead; yet Jesus goes up the mountain and reveals his glory to a bunch of disciples who have no concept about what is happening. How does God choose who "sees" and who doesn't?

We could reflect on the cloud. The same cloud that protects the Israelites in their 40 years of wandering, as it is revealed here again; and the voice, the same voice that Jesus heard at his baptism, now speaking to the disciples. We might ask, how have we experienced God's protective covering or heard the voice of God?

We could talk about the importance of heeding that voice and listening to Jesus, to his teachings, and to the life he lived, seeking to emulate him in all ways possible.

We could talk about the bumbling disciples, and how Peter can't manage to simply take in the experience without feeling like he has to take action, build dwellings, protect and honour these three who are obviously so close to God and so inspirational in the lives of the Hebrew people. And we can ask ourselves how often do we race past holiness, not stopping to simply take it in?

We could wrestle with the whole concept of Transfiguration and how it could even be possible. We could try to reason out this spectacle that is recorded in three of the gospels, dissect it, and seek scientific explanations for it.

We could talk about auras, those energetic fields that surround us as individuals and how some people have a gift for seeing those auras. Maybe that's a way to explain what the disciples saw...at least the dazzling white part!

Indeed, as with most scripture stories, there are any number of approaches we could take with this text. But what moves me, what captures me, what causes me to claim this as one of my favourite celebrations, is the sheer wonder of it; the holiness of the moment; the awe-inspiring spectacle that forms in my imagination when I read this story.

I don't want to dissect it, explain it, or normalize it. I just want to stand in awe of the power and glory of this God we worship, this Christ we adore, this Spirit that consumes us.

And so for today, in the words of James C. Howell, I will let it be, "sufficient to [simply] ponder the amazingness of God." Thanks be! Amen!

ⁱ Howell, James C. <https://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/10700/weekly-preaching-february-14-2021>