

“Dazzling and Terrifying”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
February 26, 2006  
Transfiguration Sunday  
Scripture: Mark 9:2-9

It could be a television commercial. You know, one of those laundry detergent commercials in which active people do things like slide through a mudpit, and then we see the results after their clothes have come out of the wash. Perfectly white, sparkling even. Don't you wish you used Tide, or Downy, or name your brand?

The story begins with a temporal clause – six days later. Six days, that is, after talking urgently to the disciples and a larger crowd about the challenges, the dirty work, of following him. “If any want to become my followers, [Jesus said] let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:34-35). Discipleship, in other words, would be tough, dirty work – his followers would have to risk getting their hands dirty and their clothes torn to shreds.

It was six days after that disconcerting talk that Jesus took Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain, apart from the crowds. If you have ever done much mountain climbing, you know it is hard sweaty work. Each step up becomes more difficult as the air gets thinner. They made it up to the top, Jesus and these three disciples, and they stood there collecting their breath. There they were, wiping their foreheads with their tunics, and the next thing you know they look over at Jesus and “he was transfigured before them.” The gospel's description is sparse. Mark shares only brief details with us. Elijah and Moses, the two greatest prophets stood there with Jesus, and his clothes became “dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.”

There it is, that is the laundry commercial moment in the gospel story. No kidding, that is how the gospel describes the scene - his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. From talk of suffering and a sweaty climb, suddenly Jesus' clothes became dazzling white.

What are we to make of this story? What would you say if you were up there on the mountain? Really, what would you say? Maybe you can remember a time when you shared a beautiful sunset with someone you loved and you looked over and his or her face was alive and dazzling with reflected light. What words are there to say that do not end up sounding trivial? Peter, James, and John look over and they see Jesus in dazzling white talking to Moses, the lawgiver and leader of the Exodus and talking to Elijah, the prophet who was expected to reappear on earth right before the Messiah appeared. There they are talking, and Peter decides to interrupt.

“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” The gospel writer goes on to tell us that Peter did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white, and the disciples were terrified. I wanted us to read from Eugene Peterson’s translation of Psalm 50, for his marvelous phrase, “from the dazzle of Zion, God blazes into view.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a fascinating interplay in these stories. Jesus in a dazzling light. God blazing into view. And yet, the full nature of God utterly mysterious and beyond our full knowing. Our opening hymn was “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” and when I asked the children what they could see here in this sanctuary, not one of them mentioned that they could see God. But every once in a while, our mostly invisible, ever-mysterious God blazes into view and dazzles us. And we are left, like Peter, to mumble comments and be terrified about how beautiful it is.

I think of that on those bright Sunday mornings when the sun is streaming in our recently re-installed south facing stained glass window. For fifty years that window separated the church from the wall of the parking ramp that used to abut the church wall. But now the parking ramp is gone, and the window lets in real sunlight. And on bright mornings, the sun can be almost blinding. There is something mystical and unpredictable about that dazzling light. I am delighted that we will be dedicating a window in memory of Dorothy Fahey today. Back in place, it will brighten our hallway, and help others to see in. Transfiguration of that space, but also the transfiguration of this neighborhood as a parking ramp becomes a small pocket park of green and others walk by and can see in.

I will always have a special fondness for this day in the church season, since it was on Transfiguration Sunday last year that I began as your pastor. I preached on mountaintop moments, when, for a few brief moments, the clouds part and we can see stunning views ahead of us. And I offered a few stories of what I wanted Central to be and become. It has been an amazing year here at Central - so many mountaintop moments. And Central has undergone a transfiguration. We aren’t dazzling, and I am glad we are not whiter than anyone could bleach. But still, a transfiguration has happened here at Central that dazzles us with the goodness of God.

It could be a laundry commercial – that scene up on the mountain - but Jesus doesn’t intend the clothes to stay dazzling white. The sun may blaze through the stained glass windows here, bejeweling our vision and dazzling our souls, but the clouds will come over again and the earth will rotate and the sunlight will shift.

Like Peter we try to cling to mountaintop experiences, yet they are fleeting. If you have watched any of the Winter Olympics, you have come to realize that as well. An athlete may train for four years, eight years, most of a lifetime to compete for an Olympic gold medal. Then the event itself can be over in seconds.<sup>2</sup>

Peter wanted to stop the clock. To keep the camera paused with the three of them on the medal stand, gold, silver, and bronze – Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. He wanted to freeze everything and have them all stay up there on that mountaintop. To stop time in what he knew otherwise

would quickly become the past. “It is good that we are here,” he said to Jesus. Almost pleading with Jesus. We can set up shop here – let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Heidi Neumark, the pastor of a church named Transfiguration, puts it this way.

Peter is blown away by the vision. After all, he’d spent most of his life on rough boats with rougher fishermen, eyeballing dead fish. Then he is transported to a scene of magnificence . . . where guests came transfigured . . . and sheathed in as much dazzlement as money could buy. . . Peter doesn’t want to leave the party. He’s ready to invest in some lofty real estate.

But living up high in the rarified air isn’t the point of transfiguration. It was never intended as breathing space for a precious few, never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level. When Peter proposes construction, he doesn’t get the permit: “A cloud came and overshadowed them . . . then a voice came from the cloud that said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” And Jesus led them down. Way down. . . .

When Peter and the others came down the mountain, they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration.<sup>3</sup>

Neumark says, “when the disciples of her church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood,” they discovered that

“Transfiguration” behind closed sanctuary doors existed in name only. The glorious reality was outside in the most unexpected places. . . It was, and is, [she says] a costly investment on the ground level, worth every tear, every prayer, every cent. It is an investment to honor all that has been invested in us.<sup>4</sup>

Remember those dazzling moments of transfiguration, when light streams in and all around feels holy. Treasure them. Talk about them, even if we risk stammering like Peter. But then be prepared to roll up your sleeves and get to work. For the life of faith is not to be a laundry commercial, but “a costly investment on the ground level, worth every tear, every prayer, every cent.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The psalm for the morning read earlier in worship. The verse is Psalm 50: 2.

<sup>2</sup> With appreciation to my former colleague Anne Ledbetter, who made this same connection in her sermon “From the Mountaintop to the Mundane,” preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware 18 February 1996.

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<sup>3</sup> Heidi Neumark, Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) 268-269.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.