**[1]** Transfiguration Sunday (Mar 2, 2025)
Sermon Title: Metamorphosis
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Theme: Transfiguring  – our changing images borne by hope and grace.

Other Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9 (Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36)

**[2]** We often speak of the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday as Transfiguration Sunday. This event is found in Matthew 17 and Mark 9 as well as in Luke 9. Luke differs his account slightly from the account in Matthew and Mark.   Matthew and Mark place the event six (6) days after the visit to Caesarea Philippi and Luke places the event eight (8) days after the visit. This special event in the life of the church relates to a time when James, Peter and John travel with Jesus to the top of a high mountain and are eyewitnesses to the Majestic Glory that appears through Jesus on that mountain as their eyes are protected by an overshadowing cloud.  Because they had a front-row seat to this special event, some have referred to James, Peter and John as the inner-core of the 12 disciples, the ones closest to Jesus and the ones with whom he more readily shared his inner thoughts and emotions.  In a sense, these three disciples were privileged to see the divine glory, even as they were also privileged, in another sense of that word, to be with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane while he was praying for the “cup of suffering” to pass from him.(Matt 26:37-39).   “Are ye able, says the Master, to be crucified with me? … thy guiding radiance above us shall be a beacon to God, to love and loyalty.”  Yet, like the closest disciples, we are not able to follow Jesus all the way to the cross, to stay awake with him through the wee-small hours of the night.  Luke tells us that the three were “heavy with sleep,” as the Majestic Glory appeared on the Mountain, at least until they realized what they were witnessing and became afraid as the

protective cloud overshadowed them.

**[3]** Psalm 97:2 declares that clouds surround the divine presence on every side.  When Moses first came into the Presence of God on Mount Sinai, you may remember, it was through a thick and dark cloud (Exodus 19:16), surrounded by thunder and lightning, and smoke, as the mountain shook violently.  When Solomon brought the ark of the covenant into the Temple in Jerusalem, it was into a room filled with a cloud of thick darkness (1 Kings 8:12).  The author of Hebrews (Heb 12:18-24) writes that Moses trembled with fear before Sinai, seeing a blazing fire set apart by darkness and gloom, and hearing out of a tempest, a “voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.”  But, not here on this mountain today. Instead, the cloud of God is experienced as a bright cloud and not a dark cloud.  A welcoming voice comes out of the cloud that begs us to listen for more words, like Mary (Luke 10:39), who at the feet of Jesus, could simply not get enough of hearing our Savior teaching, and we also are eager to listen to the Word of Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, the Chosen One, Listen to Him.”  The author of Hebrews draws the contrast: “You are not in fear like Moses before Sinai, you have come to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering … and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” (Heb 12:22-24).  This calls for another protocol unlike Sinai, where “Jesus says, Rise and have no fear.”  Peter expresses the nature of this comforting ‘mountain’ voice as a “lamp shining in a dark place as the day begins to dawn and a light-bearing star is rising in our hearts.” (2 Peter 1:18,20).
Perhaps this is where we should think of our worship, out liturgy, literally, the work of the people, as the inbreaking of the glory of God into our hearts as we engage in praising and adoring Christ and listening to his word.  There is a dance to our spirit when we worship in this way, like the ancient circle dances, where we hold our arms into the air and dance the word of God into our lives. It brings our entire body and mind and spirit into the experience of worship.  Some have even interpreted “Majestic Glory” as the Holy Spirit of God enflaming and in-winding us to love and serve in the name of our Lord.  The idea behind the Feast of Tabernacles, or as we might say, the Feast of Tents, or Booths, was to camp outside under the starry sky so that nothing came between a worshipper and God, so that no roof was present barring total access to God.  In the fifteenth day of the seventh month (Tishri), people were to set aside time for intimate conversation with God.  And, so Peter declares on Transfiguration

Mountain that he will build three tabernacles, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus.  And, of course, assuming one for Peter himself and James and John, all for the purpose of having an extended conversation about all things human, holy and divine.  This would be a conversation to begin and end all conversations.  If the right prophets and people would be present. It would be heaven on earth, and they, Peter, James and John, would have front-row seats, to ask any and all questions that might come to them.

**[4]** But, why on a mountaintop, a high mountain apart?  From ancient times, mountains have been considered holy places, thin places for revelation and conversation, secret places for private prayer, where intimate details can be revealed in a heartbeat, and deep conversations can begin in safety. To be born from above was the same as being born again, only with your heart uplifted rather than withdrawing.  This is not Mount Everest, to the top of which only a few can ascend by hard work, but a different type of mountain, not a mountain of worldly wisdom or worldly conversation, but a mountain of holy hope and conversation, based on a peace that goes beyond all understanding.  In the words of the old Irish hymn: “Be thou my vision, O lord of my heart.  Naught be all else to me, Save that Thou art. Thou my best thought, By day or by night, Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.”

Clearly, Luke wants us to recall the story from Exodus as he tells us about the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain.   But, what is this mountain of which Luke speaks.  We do not really know which mountain it is. It is a place where Jesus retires to pray and get away from the hordes of people for awhile.  That is all we really know about it.   Matthew and Mark indirectly suggest that it is a mountain close to Caesarea Philippi.  Since this village was located on the southwestern slope of Mount Hermon, about 25 miles NE of the Sea of Galilee, some scholars naturally think that the mountain mentioned in scripture is Mount Hermon or possibly Mount Lebanon.   The word “Lebanon” in Hebrew means “white” because the tops of the mountains were said to be covered with snow all year around (Jer 18:14) and also because of the hue of its limestone cliffs and peaks.   Early church tradition (Cyril and Jerome) placed the Transfiguration at Mount Tabor just east of Nazareth about 6 kilometers.  It seems clear that the mountain is not Mount Carmel which is known as Elijah’s mountain.

**[5]** Luke goes on to explain to us that Peter, James and John are heavy with sleep, but just barely awake enough to see something rather miraculous.   Luke tells us that the three disciples see Jesus, Moses, and Elijah walking together on the mountain, all in their glory.   Luke, unlike Matthew and Mark, actually tells us what Moses, Elijah and Jesus are discussing. They are discussing the “departure” or “exodus” to be accomplished when Jesus goes to Jerusalem.   The Greek word is “exodon” which can be translated departure, or exit, or death.   The King James Version translates it as “death”.   Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were talking about how Jesus would die by going up to Jerusalem.  However, there is a certain sense in which you can see this as the “new exodus” that Jesus will launch as he enters Jerusalem, extending the exodus of Moses and the people of God from Egypt.   This new exodus leads us into a new freedom wrapped in courage, bestowed by the cross.  A new freedom from despair, pain, suffering, addiction, and even death itself.   Moses, Elijah, Jesus talk about the new exodus, but the three disciples do not hear the discussion. Instead, Peter, in a kind of subconscious state, half asleep and half awake, suggests that they should make three tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus.

**[6]** To see the transfiguration of Jesus, we must have eyes of faith, vision and insight beyond what eye has seen or ear has heard or mind has conceived”  (1 Cor 2:9).  On the high mountain, Jesus does not turn into a spirit, but remains in his body, but now a body that appears in power and glory.  We might understand this better if we say that the body of Jesus underwent a metamorphosis type of change.  In fact, the Greek word we translate as “transfigured” is actually “metamorphed,” but this does not sound good in the English language, so we say “transfigured” instead. My generation, at least the boys, would have totally understood the word, especially if they were readers of a comic book series entitled “Metamorpho.”   In this comic book, the main character completely changes himself into whatever he needs to be in order to capture the bad guys. There was also a software program that goes by the same name which takes a picture of someone’s face and gradually, smoothly, transforms one face into another face right in front of our eyes on the computer screen. Using the software program, one could magically make someone’s face transform or metamorphosize into a totally different face.

With regard to this transfigurating event, Jesus’ body changed before the eyes of Peter, James and John, his face shining like the sun and his clothes as white as no fuller on earth could ever bleach them.  If you remember, in the First Testament accounts of Moses, the face of Moses shone like the moon, a reflected light, and not as the sun, a direct light.  The shining in Moses face was so weak that it could be concealed by a thin veil over his face.  But, on this mountain, even the garments of Jesus are enlightened by Christ’s glory and do not in any way cover it up. So, we are able to say with those who truly believe, that we are eyewitnesses of the Truth, and not just someone who listening to a fable that teaches something important.  We are eyewitnesses that indeed the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame leap.  Our sense of hearing is such that we can perceive voices which are not perceivable in the air surrounding us.  Our sense of seeing is such that can see things that are invisible to the naked eye, but visible to the spiritual eye, the mind’s eye, as they say.  Our sense of smelling is such that it picks up scents beyond our normal ability to smell, such as when Isaac smells Jacob’s garments and declares them as having the scent of a “full field which the Lord has blessed.” (Gen 27:27).  Or, a sense of smell that picks up the sweet fragrance of Jesus Christ in a crowd. .Ours is a sense of taste that can identify the goodness in the Word of God (Heb 6:5) or can identify the honey-sweetness of the Ezekiel’s scroll [Torah].  (Ezek 3:3)  Ours is a sense of touch by which John declares that he has “handled the Word of God with his own hands.”  (1 John 1:1)  When Jesus touches a leper, he not only heals the visible illness, but the spiritual illness as well. And Peter speaks for all of us when he says: “Lord, it is good to be here!”

In the Second Letter of Peter, chapter 1, verses 16-18, we find Peter’s description of this event:

“We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.  For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘ This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased,’ we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain….Pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

**[7]** In Acts 14:8-20, Luke gives us another story about metamorphosis. This time the setting is Lystra. This event happened in front of a small religious shrine at the edge of town, a shrine to the local god Zeus whom the Romans call Jupiter. Paul and Barnabas are the characters in this story of transfiguration. At the end of the story, the people start believing that Paul and Barnabas are Roman gods walking among them and begin to bring gifts to them for favor. Let us pick up the story in the narrator’s words:

   With Paul and Barnabas standing in front of them, the crowd thought they recognized Zeus, the father of all their gods, and his messenger Hermes. The Roman poet Ovid had written a poem called “Metamorphoses” in the first century CE describing an old couple (Philemon and Baucis in the Phrygian legend) living not far from Lystra who had welcomed two gods, Zeus and Hermes, into their home without realizing who they were. The poet tells us that they were enormously blessed by the visit—their cottage becoming a shrine. In the legends, Hermes, the
lesser god, was speaking, while Zeus was silent.  So, since Paul was talking and Barnabas was listening, why would it not be the same as what the older couple saw?  ‘Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. This is the only way it could be.’  People were rioting in the streets as two gods were walking around healing people and disrupting business. Paul and Barnabas should have realized that their actions and words were going to provoke something, but they had never suspected this.  Paul had been speaking and noticed that the crippled man was intently focused on his words, that he seemed to be “ready” in his listening to receive the gift of healing (14:9).  The scripture says that he not only listened, but that he “persevered” in his listening.  He was ready to believe!  He totally believed that Paul’s God could change his life right on the spot. He was absolutely ready to give up on all the worthless idols and pursuits, ready to GO ALL IN with Paul’s words of faith, with God’s ability to immediately re-shape his broken body into
wholeness, first-time wholeness, forever!  Paul looked into his eyes and saw his faith.  And things went totally wild from that moment on.  But Paul did not heal him, God did! Paul only said the words: “Stand up!”

WOCC, might this upcoming Lenten season be our Lystra moment! Surely, we can say with Peter: “Lord, it is good to be here!” Alleluia! Amen.