

**Clouds of Transformation**  
**Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36**  
**Thomas H. Yorty, Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
**February 22, 2004, Transfiguration Sunday**

I got to wondering after reading today's passage from Luke, what the most difficult stretch of highway in America might be. I'll make the connection here in just a minute. I wonder what you think it is. In my opinion, it's not that very narrow two-lane highway from San Luis Obispo to San Francisco. At some points, if you happen to be on the west side of the road, you can feel like you're very close to going off the cliff into the ocean.

It isn't, either, that interstate going from Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico all the way to the south rim of the Grand Canyon through lonely desert and high winds. No, in my opinion, the toughest stretch of highway in America starts on I90 at the first exit in Rochester, westbound, after midnight, coming to Exit 50, where you pay your toll. I hate to admit to anything being boring, but that stretch of road is really boring.

And on not a few occasions I have hallucinated from lack of sleep driving that piece of the highway. Driving that road on one occasion, a state trooper, at about 3:30 in the morning, lights flashing, pulled me over and came up to the window and said, "You're falling asleep, aren't you?" Ahhh, I said, wondering if a ticket was soon to follow. But he was very nice and said there's a service area about two miles away, let me lead you there. That stretch of road is tough at night because it's boring and you do your best to stay awake.

Just like Peter, James and John on the mountain, in this morning's reading, with Jesus. They were 'weighted down with sleep,' is the way Luke says it. You're not sure whether they've fallen asleep or whether they're still slightly conscious or not. Jesus takes them to the mountain, to this windy knoll. And just as they seem to be falling asleep, Jesus is praying by the way, that same sequence of events happens later in the Gospel, on the day of Jesus' arrest. Jesus praying and the disciples falling asleep, happens here on the Mount of Transfiguration had you ever noticed it? So there they are, about to fall asleep and just then the plot thickens. Do you remember what happens? Suddenly Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. And Luke says, because they had remained awake, they saw Moses and Elijah and Jesus 'in his glory.'

Luke doesn't tell us exactly what it means to see someone in their glory. But the best thing that I can imagine is, for example, I used to watch Carol nurse our sons. She was 'in her glory' as a mother. Or listening to our choir when they sing with abandon as they do just about every Sunday and certainly did just a minute ago. And as they did on Christmas Eve. We heard our choir 'in their glory.' You know the old phrase, 'so and so was in her glory.' What it refers to is that moment when the essence of who we are sparkles through, shines through everything else for others to see. And there was Jesus that day on the mountain, 'in his glory' as the Lord and Savior of humankind.

It reminds me of Moses, this morning, in that reading that Paula shared with us, coming down from Mt. Sinai, his face shone. Moses was 'in his glory,' bringing the

tablets of the law to the people. His face shone so much that he took to putting a veil over it.

Not unlike celebrities who wear sunglasses. Their faces are so powerful in public because we recognize them, that they can't handle that total 24/7 recognition – maybe we couldn't either. So they don the shades. They have to go a little bit incognito. Thus, Moses wears his veil, says Exodus, over his face. His face was shining so much in his glory, having conversed with God, and bringing the tablets of stone as lawgiver to the people. This is the essence of who Moses was.

Do you remember what happens next in this episode? Peter, typical of Peter, blurts out, 'Master, let me build three booths, one for you, one for Elijah and one for Moses.' It was an ill-considered thing to say and the timing wasn't so great either. I would sort of compare it to, maybe, noticing your host's lovely necklace at a dinner party and commenting how beautiful it is and then saying, by the way, how much did that cost? Can't Moses just relax and appreciate what he has seen? But we shouldn't be too hard on Peter. We know where he's coming from. When you behold someone in their glory, you want to control it, you want to keep it there. Peter wants to build a little dwelling that Jesus can go into, so that Peter can have and see Jesus in his glory for as long as he wants to, uninterrupted. It might be construed as selfish even if it is understandable.

I am reminded of catching fireflies as a child, lightning bugs we called them in Pittsburgh. Do you remember ever seeing the thousands of lightning bugs of a summer evening lighting over a pasture or a backyard? And we would always find a Mason Jar and punch holes in it and run and try to catch one. And then get one or two in the jar and they would sort of glow off and on and it was always a little disappointing. A firefly, in it's glory, is only in it's glory when it's with thousands of others lighting up a backyard or a field. Capturing one in a jar isn't quite the same.

Moments of glory are ethereal. They are fleeting. And the point, I think, for Peter that you can't bottle up the Holy One of Israel. You can not put boundaries around God. You can't nail God down. Don't even go there.

Reminds me of that wonderful passage from Annie Dillard's *Talking to a Stone*, where she tells the story of being with her husband on a mountain back in the late 70's, when there was a total eclipse of the sun. Maybe you remember when that happened. She was in the state of Washington. And she said it was broad daylight that day. It was late morning. And then in an instant, the eclipse changed everything. She said the sky suddenly turned to navy blue. Her hands turned to silver. The grass, she said, on the other hills where the wind had laid it down, looked like fine-spun metal. When God's cloud came and overshadowed Jesus and the three disciples, that moment was unlike anything else that they had ever experienced before.

And there was a voice from the cloud and God said, "This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to Him." And then the cloud disappeared and Moses and Elijah were gone and the three disciples were there standing with Jesus.

Do you remember how the story ends? They come back down the mountain and, says Luke, they were silent about these things and told no one.

That's the punch line for me today. Those disciples having encountered what perhaps any of us would give our right arm to encounter – the cloud of God's presence, Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah in his glory. What more could one ask for by way of a holy encounter? And then, can you imagine, having had it going back to life as usual. But the disciples were human, like you and me. It says something about the comfort of our routine and habit. It says something about the power of our routine and habit and the fact that we are loath to change even after having encountered God. And so what I would like to do this morning is to make an offer, an alternative perhaps, to "business-as-usual faith." I would like to suggest another way here on the eve of Lent to consider the next weeks ahead.

We were in our Adult Education class today, The Way of the Artist. There were over twenty people around the circle I asked each one to share where they had experienced a work of art or a moment of beauty in the week past. Some people talked about having an experience in nature. Others talked about being in an art gallery. Some talked about hearing music. One person talked about being in a subway in New York, listening to a young person play the guitar. And in each of these illustrations and stories was a life context, which that experience of art and beauty, spoke to.

When we have those experiences, there is something deep in us that resonates with the Creator of life and the purpose of life. And so what I would like to suggest to you today is that on this Ash Wednesday at noon or 6:00PM when we gather here in the chapel and when we make the Sign of the Cross on your forehead in ashes, signifying that you intend to journey with Jesus to the cross, I want to challenge you over the next forty days, as you encounter clouds of transformation in your life, moments of beauty, occasions when God speaks to your soul, that you will not go back to "business-as-usual faith."

But that you will listen to that experience and ask where it leads. Where it leads, of course, in the larger sense is to the cross, and to service. Where it leads ultimately is to unconditional love and sacrifice. The question for you and me in Lent is where do our holy encounters lead in our particular lives. In the relationships that make up your life and my life. That is what our journey in Lent invites us to discern. Amen.