

Up and Down, In and Out
Luke 9:28-43
February 7, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

I'm not a grandfather yet, although I'm looking forward to the job, whenever it comes. In fact I'm already thinking about what I want to teach them. What have you taught your grandchildren? Or what did you learn from your grandparents? What can I teach those potential grandchildren of ours? Many of you know that my grandparents lived on a farm between Mason and Eaton Rapids and that we would come back to Michigan many years to visit them and we would always stay on the farm. I loved to visit in the summer because I knew grandpa would take us out to fish. He loved to fish and it was he who taught me how to tie a hook on my line, how to cast, how to clean a fish, and most of all how to be patient, waiting for the fish to bite. I also used to love going with granny out to the barn in the morning. Not because I wanted to learn how to feed the cows or how to milk them or how to shovel manure or how to avoid getting kicked by flying hooves, although those would have been fine skills to learn, and certainly valuable later in life. No, granny taught me how to swear. She was a sweet woman, but she was a farmer and had been all her life. She had grown up poor and she and grandpa had lost their farm in the depression and live through the '30s and '40s working other people's farms. She was sweet but she could be tough. I picture her being born with her hands on her hips, exclaiming, "Well, say!" and then following that with a few well chosen words. She never used those words with me, but she would certainly use them with the cows, and since they were words that I never heard around my house, I was excited to hear them from Granny. So I learned a lot from my grandparents, how to fish and how to swear. But actually, if I really think about it, I learned patience and hard work and endurance in the midst of hardship. Those are not bad lessons to learn, even if I did pick up some new vocabulary too.

For me trips to Michigan, times we spent on the farm, swimming and fishing in the pond, playing euchre with my cousins, and time with my grandparents were special times. They were some of my

mountaintop experiences. They were times when I got to see things a little differently. I didn't realize it at the time, but they were times when God was teaching me something. That's what happens to Peter and James and John when they go up on the mountain with Jesus. They saw Jesus changed, and his face shone, it says. Those kind of experiences happen to each of us, I think. Frederick Buechner talks about the transfiguration and says, "Even with us something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking with his child in the park, of a woman baking bread, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing."¹ They have an experience of a different reality. They see Jesus differently. They hear a voice that tells them to listen. And they are different when they come back down. And they have to come back down. It's the coming back down that we sometimes ignore.

Usually when this passage comes up in the lectionary, it's just the story of the transfiguration. The lectionary for this week gives us chapter nine, verses 28 through 36. The rest of the passage, verses 37 through 43 are optional. And rightly so if you read it. They are totally different. They have nothing to do with each other. One is up the other is down. The wise preacher should stick to the up passage, preach about mountaintop experiences and leave the rest of it for another week. The mystery of the transfiguration is enough to think about for one week.

Except that's not true. They have everything to do with each other. You can't understand one without the other. There is no up without a down. The disciples are given that moment of transcendence on the mountaintop so that they will understand the healing of the boy. Who is this that has healed the boy? Is he just some miracle worker, or is he something more? The disciples are given that moment of service so they will understand the moment of mystery on the mountaintop. Is this divine Christ calling us to join him in heaven? Or has he come to be one of us, leading us back down the mountain to those

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Whistling in the Dark*. p. 108.

who need our help?

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor in New York. She uses these verses in telling her story. In her memoir call *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* she talks about the transfiguration of the church she served for almost twenty years. Aptly named the Transfiguration Lutheran Church, the community was struggling, barely surviving when she arrived. Standing amid poverty and the myriad problems that can accompany a demon like that—crime, drug abuse, lack of education and opportunity, lack of hope—Transfiguration mostly kept its doors shut tight to the world around it. The work of Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit was example enough for her. “When Peter and the others came down from the mountain,” she writes, “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. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty. . . . but they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.”²

The transfiguration does not make sense without the descent down the mountain, the return to the world to serve. We gather here each Sunday and we are uplifted by the beauty of our building, transported by the music, soothed by the scriptures, enlivened by being with one another, fed and strengthened by the sacrament. But we are given those moments for a purpose. Coming in doesn't make any sense without going out. We come in so that we can go back out into the world to serve, to feed, to embrace, to act as ambassadors for Christ. We meet Christ here so we can go and be Christ to the world out there. Moments of transfiguration, moments of transcendence, gifts of grace come to us so we can take them with us. My grandparents taught me patience and endurance. I carry their faces with me to this day. We gather here to be strengthened, to be uplifted, to see the face of Christ in one another—so that, as we go out there, we have had practice in seeing the face of Christ in all we meet.

² Quoted by Hale, Lori, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, volume 1, p. 456.