

Transfiguration sermon, 2019, Luke

At our clergy text study last week, held every Wednesday morning at 8:30 AM at the New London Café, we were again discussing the nature of Scripture, and of how we best understand and engage with the Word of God. One of the suggestions was that we see Scripture as a conversation; between God and humanity, and also between the various authors and books of Scripture with itself and with us. I found myself thinking of what it would be like to literally have a conversation with one of the authors of a Biblical book. If, for example, St. Paul and I were talking over a cup of tea at the New London Café, I could imagine myself expressing how deeply profound and inspirational I find many of his writings. I could also imagine myself asking for clarification, maybe even arguing a point or two, Paul having his share of human foibles like all of us do. Certainly our text from Paul's letter for today is one about which I would probably like to express a bit of disbelief if we were literally conversing. It would surprise me if you wouldn't feel the same, if you look at his words with much care. For example, I love some of these words and find them deeply inspiring, and I'd be delighted to tell Paul so. Our first verse-- "Since then we have such a hope, we act with great boldness"---nicely done, St. Paul. I find that an encouraging word, a reminder that as people who at all times embrace the radical notion of resurrection, we can act boldly. And also, the verse, "The Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." This, too, sounds like a word of grace, a reminder that God is ever present and ever looking not to burden us, but to free us. Eloquent and inspiring, St. Paul.

But, I might want to push back at the verse that follows and maybe you would too. He wrote, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a

mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Really, St. Paul? I mean, is that so? Have you noticed lately that you are being transformed from one degree of glory to another? Would you be able to demonstrate that you are more glorious right now than you were a week ago? Or a year ago? Or a decade ago? In all honesty, glory isn’t a word I associate very frequently with myself at all. Do you with yourself? As you brushed your teeth this morning and glanced at the mirror, did you think, “I am definitely a bit more glorious today than yesterday?” I surely didn’t! Not even close. Now presumably, Paul is speaking spiritually rather than physically, but even then, I’d be a little hard pressed to document any increase in interior glory. I’d like to talk that out with Paul, if I had the chance.

And furthermore, he then continues, “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” Again, I would want to say, “Really? “We do not lose heart?” You think not, St. Paul? Because I don’t think it’s all that difficult to lose heart, myself.” How about you? Do you get discouraged? I find it difficult to *not* be discouraged if I spend too much time immersing myself in the news of the day. India and Pakistan may be on the brink of nuclear war? North Korea still harbors nuclear capacity? Our domestic politics are an ugly mess beyond description? And every other celebrity seems to be a sexual predator of some kind? I might argue that the world can be a pretty dark and scary place, exactly the kind of place, I might tell St. Paul, where it is all *too easy* to lose heart.

And of course, the dark and scary parts of life aren’t all held at a newspaper headline’s distance. Far from it. Some of it is up close and personal. Two of our church members have died in the past two weeks. Several of us are fighting cancer. It’s seemed like it’s been a tough winter for health and well being for many. It’s been relentlessly cold and isolating. It gets to be sad and

scary, and I think we could make a sound argument that it's actually pretty easy to lose heart.

One wonders, actually, what Paul could have been thinking! Was his own life so protected and sheltered from hardship that he could make these unlikely claims? Hardly! He lived as a nomad, dealt with strained financial circumstances, imprisonments, ostracism, and health issues of his own. So, he didn't write these words out of a false sense of ease. Let's look again at the whole verse: "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."

Ah. So there it is. It's the underlying *mercy of God*, the conviction that God calls us and is with us in this world, even our dark and scary places, that prevents us from losing heart. Paul's finely tuned awareness of God's presence and purpose apparently kept Paul from growing weary and discouraged, from losing heart. How, we might wonder, did Paul *hone* that awareness of God's presence and purpose? How did he gain that spiritual resilience? Could we do so also?

Let's look now to our Gospel lesson, the familiar story of the Transfiguration, and see if we might find an answer there. Jesus and his three closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, are getting away for a little rest on top of a mountain. They needed a break. Maybe it was a little bit like how so many of us have been making our way to Florida or Mexico or Arizona and flooding Facebook with pictures of ourselves lolling about in the sunshine, holding drinks with little umbrellas in them. Now possibly, Jesus, James, John, and Peter did not get to have quite that type of experience, *although* we should not always imagine these men in an overly pious, stiff, religious way. They very likely cracked jokes as they hiked up the mountain, talked and laughed as they reached the top, and certainly they got to know one another better during this time apart, even without the drinks with umbrellas sequence. In fact, the three disciples *definitely* learned something they may not have known about Jesus during this time apart. Because He is

transfigured before them, a dazzling Christ, and God's voice declares that Jesus is God's beloved Son and Chosen One, they should listen to Him.

Now, just as Paul's hopeful resilience may seem a little out of reach to us at times, so this story of mountaintop transformations can also leave us feeling a little left out. If we did not climb a mountain with Jesus and see Him transfigured, we may be feeling a little flat, a little dull, a little worn in spirit about now. But, just as we recognize that Paul found his reason for hope through his awareness of God's presence and purpose, we might also recognize that these three disciples had their unique experience because of a particular circumstance, namely—they were spending time with Jesus. They were, like St. Paul, *in God's presence*. So perhaps both St. Paul and these three men had the spiritual resilience that they did because of their proximity to God. How, then, might we experience that proximity? Well, let's dig a little deeper.

We read of this story of Christ's transfiguration in 3 of the 4 Gospels; Mark, Matthew, and Luke. But were we to lay these accounts side by side, as scholars do, we would note that Luke has a particular slant that is missing in Mark and Matthew's account. Luke emphasizes *prayer*. *Only Luke* specifies in the opening verse of our lesson that the four men went up on the mountain to pray. Mark and Matthew just record that they went up the mountain; no reason is given. And *only Luke* states that it is while Jesus was praying that this transfiguration occurred. So, Luke emphasizes the role of *prayer* in having experiences of God's presence, and he does so throughout his writings. Luke is the only Gospel author to tell us of Jesus praying on other momentous occasions, too. In Luke, Jesus prays all night before calling his disciples. He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. He even prays from the cross! Again and again, Luke will lift up the importance of prayer in Jesus' life *and* in the life of Jesus's followers. Paul, who authored

our second lesson, was *one* of those followers and also a man prayer. Can it be that prayer is a means for us to hone our spiritual awareness of God's presence? Is prayer one of the ways we can stand with Paul and agree that in fact, we also do not lose heart? Could the practice of prayer increase our spiritual resilience and hopefulness?

Let's think about prayer a bit. But let's not *overthink* prayer, which I think we so easily do. We make prayer too hard sometimes. What is prayer, what does it do? It's essentially communion with God, right? Which might mean listening or conversing or just spending time together, but somehow communicating with God. It might be spontaneous, it might involve ancient words or rituals, it could happen anywhere at any time. Methods or techniques are not important; what *is* important, is that we pray. But, if that's what prayer *is*, then what does prayer do? I'd like to share a brief story about prayer that Pat Hanson has shared before with us.

When Pat had her stroke a some years back, she had to have an MRI. I've never had one, but I understand they can be a pretty scary and claustrophobic experience, as you must lie still within the narrow tube, surrounded by the huge machine. But, Pat related that she felt absolutely calm as she underwent this intimidating medical procedure. And as she was lying inside the machine, she had a clear image in her mind's eye of all the people who were praying for her, standing outside and around the MRI unit. It was like a circle of prayer that supported her and gave her peace. It was as though that community of prayer was *actually* together and present in that time and space.

That's one of the things prayer does....it connects us to God and to each other in a connect web of love and support. And we instinctively turn to prayer when those we love are in

need of support. This last week, when word spread that Laurie's husband, David Jackson, had died, what did most of us do, first thing? We prayed! It was our way to be a part of the interweaving web of love and support between God, Laurie and ourselves. Prayer changes things!

Neither of us these little stories that speak to the power of prayer are unusual or unique, but we don't often hear these stories, do we? Surprisingly, even devout Christians are not always comfortable sharing their prayer experiences, but while we may not see Jesus transfigured on a mountain top, many of us have had or do have experiences of some depth or intensity that involve prayer. Prayer may not be as complicated as we tend to make it, but is it also more amazing than we tend to realize? You know how we marvel that the internet makes it a small world, where we can connect with people all around the planet in moments? Prayer does that too. Prayer connects us with others praying, or with those for whom we pray, around our world. Time and space become immaterial. And prayer also connects us with God, to whom our prayers are directed. As we spend time, either quietly chilling with God or in conversation with God, we deepen that connection and grow that relationship. So prayer deepens our relationship with God and with others. And it does something else as well....it gives us a different way to frame our lives. We *see* things differently when we pray. We begin to see the world and others through God's eyes, and that transforms our perspective. If we meet up with someone for whom we've prayed, we are naturally and genuinely interested in finding out how they're doing. If an event about which we've been anxious happens, and we've prayed about it before hand, we experience God's presence during that event and we see how God has been at work. Prayer, then, functions in at least two ways: it grows our relationship with God, *and* it enhances our awareness of God's

role in our daily lives. As we learn from St. Paul and as we see in the event of the Transfiguration, honing our awareness of God's presence in our lives through prayer leads us to find hope and encouragement, to build spiritual resilience; maybe even to experience a bit of growth in glory somehow. Because the world looks different when we see it framed by an awareness of God's presence with us. Doesn't it? The falling snow seems more wondrous. The hand held at the hospital bedside seems warmer and more comforting. The birthing of a new baby seems downright miraculous. The connections between people seem stronger and more enduring. When we pray, when we spend time with God, we see things differently, we act differently, and that, in turn, contributes to the world being a different place. Then, like St. Paul, we might also say, "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." And like the disciples, we might have some opportunities to see transformations, too, in ourselves or others. Because seeing the world through the light of Christ does transform us; it deepens our gratitude, increases our sensitivity, opens us up to glory, and broadens our compassion. Amen.