

Are You Convinced?
A Sermon by Rev. Jessica C. Gregory
February 26, 2017 – Transfiguration Sunday
Luke 9:28-36

A week ago last Friday, an unbelievably perfect spring like day, my sons, Peter and Nathan, and I basked in the sun's warmth as we played outside at a nearby park. While I was pushing Peter on the swing I couldn't help but overhear the conversation a fourth grader was having with his mother as she pushed him on the swing next to Peter's. "It's spring, mom!" "No, honey. It is winter," she replied. "But in spring I wear my t-shirt and play at the park – that's what I am doing right now – it's spring today!" the boy announced. The mom replied again, "No honey, it is winter. It feels like spring, but it isn't." The boy was quiet for a while as he was swinging up and down. Then, calmly and assertively he stated, "It IS spring, Mom." The mom sighed and changed the subject. For better and for challenge, children are very concrete human beings! Like all of us, they use what they know to make sense of the world around them.

Rather than suddenly experiencing spring during winter, in the Scripture for today we find the disciples, James, John and Peter, suddenly experiencing an extraordinary event happening *to* Jesus, not to the people he encounters. Jesus takes the disciples up to a mountain top to pray: "And as Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29). Whoa! These disciples cannot make sense of it.

This has not happened before. Jesus has recently healed Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter, and a woman who suffered from hemorrhages for over a decade. He has blessed five loaves and two fish and fed a crowd, after which Peter confessed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah of God. He has talked about his death and resurrection, but Jesus' appearance never changed – just the world around him.

The disciples were awestruck and overwhelmed by Jesus' glow, and made even more so when two figures appeared on either side of Jesus – Moses and Elijah, symbols of the Law and the Prophets, men God chose to reveal Godself to, when atop mountains. Moses climbed the mountain to intercede with Yahweh for the Israelites and to receive the Ten Commandments. Elijah, fighting on Yahweh's behalf, battled the prophets of Baal and in his victory reconfirmed God's identity and faithfulness to Israel.

We find Moses again on a mountain at the very end of his life as he looks out at the Promised Land, the place he had devoted his life's journey to. That was as close to the land as Moses got, until this moment. In this event with Jesus, God's promise to Moses to arrive at the Promised Land is fulfilled.

Our God is a God who keeps promises. This is what God tells us on that mountain top. The transfiguration is a unique experience of God in all of God's fullness, from the time of Moses and Elijah to the time of one who God has sent to fulfill all promises – God himself, his son Jesus. The Law and the Prophet flank Jesus and talk with him about his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. With this surreal dialogue, Jesus' earlier foreshadowing of his death is affirmed. As he remarked following Peter's confession of him as Lord: "The Son of Man must

undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Luke 9:22).

Up until this point, Jesus has been roaming through Israel teaching, healing, and feeding. But from this point forward, Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, walking toward his death and resurrection.

Peter, although Scripture tells us he is not aware of what he is saying, in his subconscious wants to hold on to this moment, to hold on to Moses, Elijah and Jesus. He suggests building a dwelling or booth for each of them, just as the Lord, through his prophet Moses, told the Israelites to do during the Festival of the Tabernacle. For it was in these shanty dwellings that the Israelites lived during the Exodus. Peter is using what he knows to make sense of what is happening.

But Peter hadn't finish uttering the words of his plan when a cloud rolls in, enveloping them in foggy mist. And then a voice says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to HIM!" In this pinnacle moment, God chooses to reveal to Peter, James and John, in awesome fashion, that Jesus is his son, and that Jesus is God. God makes it clear that the disciples, not convinced of Jesus' identity, should live out their baptisms and follow him. God in all God's fullness is before them.

As the words ring out, Moses and Elijah disappear, leaving only Jesus. The moment has passed. The disciples are confused by what has happened, and return, dumbfounded, down the mountain with Jesus. They do not understand what they just saw. It is easy to assume that after this mountaintop event the disciples are *finally* convinced that Jesus is Lord, seemingly one of the intents of the experience. Transfiguration is often understood to result in transformation.

But I don't think the disciples are transformed by this event. Peter still denies Jesus three times, and James and John search for the kingdom on earth. If we read on in Acts, also written by Luke and seen as a continuation of his gospel, the disciples do not preach about the transfiguration. As AWESOME as it was, it seems the transfiguration did not transform the disciples, at least not at the time it happened.

Unlike James, Peter and John, we hear this Scripture knowing the ending. We know that Jesus will walk to Jerusalem and will suffer. He will be crucified and he will die. He will rise. Luke knew this too, as did all the gospel writers. They are telling the story after the resurrection has happened. And Luke, Mark and Matthew all include this transfiguration story, understanding its significance as God's full self-revelation.

We hear those words again, "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to *him*." As Christians, we say yes! We are convinced! We rejoice that our God keeps God's promises. We rejoice that Jesus was among us on earth and is still with us today. We rejoice that we have a truth that we can stand on, a truth that we can depend on, a truth we can count on. Jesus is with us, no matter what is going on.

Yet, sometimes it's hard to live out that belief, and easy to let the doubt find a way into our hearts. Are we convinced, in this time when the truth seems to be up for grabs more than ever? a time when we don't know what to depend on? a time when we long for certainty? Can we say AMEN to Peter's speech in Acts: "Therefore let [us] know with certainty that God made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus who was crucified" (Acts 2:36).

For the disciples' transformation of faith – for them to be convinced once and for all that Jesus is Lord – they had to journey with Jesus through Jerusalem. They had to journey with Jesus to the cross. They had to grieve Jesus' death. They had to question Jesus' rising. They had to journey with Jesus after he was resurrected on the Road to Emmaus and along the beach. They had to break bread with him for their eyes to be opened to his true identity as Lord. Only then were they convinced.

After the transfiguration, the disciples continue to follow Jesus. They do not walk on, fully convinced of Jesus being Lord, but they walk on as faithful disciples; faithful disciples of one that *on most days* they believe to be the Messiah; faithful enough to "follow him in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what they have already experienced" (Culpepper 207). Faithful men who struggle with doubt, just like us.

As humans, who need grace and live with doubt, we keep moving forward in faithfulness, just like the disciples did so long ago. We walk with faithfulness in the ways of Jesus and follow him, especially when he takes us to a mountain top. For while we know how Jesus' story ends, we do not know the ending of our own.

We can only see now with clarity how the steps we've taken before, so long ago, and the summits we've reached, have brought us to where we are today. Transformation comes from not just the steps, or faithfulness, and not just the mountain highs, it comes from the experiences of both. What was true of the disciples then is true of us now – our experience of Jesus Christ is greater than that of our limited understanding of the divine revelation in him.

In our baptism, we are claimed in front of a body of believers and we are called to participate in the world as Jesus' hands and feet in faith and trust. We continue on our journeys, aware of Jesus presence' alongside us to keep us upright, behind us to keep us moving and in front of us to lead the way, even when we don't know where we are being led.

In the film, *La La Land*, which is nominated for the Best Picture in tonight's Academy Awards, we meet two young artists in Hollywood who are hungry to make their dreams come true. Mia is a struggling actress and Sebastian is an ambitious but broke jazz pianist. After several chance encounters they begin to date and quickly become deeply invested in each other's lives and dreams. They are one another's biggest cheerleaders and accountability partners. It is Sebastian who names for Mia her desire not just to act in other people's plays but to write her own. Buoyed by Sebastian's confidence in her ability to do this thing she always thought impossible, Mia sets to writing her play. While below the Hollywood hills, Mia has a mountain top experience in her writing. This is it! Writing is what she is meant to do! She begins to see her future differently than ever before.

Filled with excitement and pride, Mia has Sebastian read it. He is blown away and assures her that it will be picked up by producers. And then she sends it off, only to receive rejection after rejection after rejection. Disappointed but not defeated, Mia keeps taking faithful steps towards her dream. She chooses to rent a stage and self-produce, promote, direct and star in her one person, one act play.

She performs for a dozen people. It is the definition of a flop. Now, Mia is defeated. She has taken all the steps she knows how to take, and she has not ended up where

she wanted to go. She is not at all convinced of her future. She leaves Hollywood to return to her childhood home. Months pass. Mia spends her time lost, wondering what is next for her. And then one day, out of the blue, a call comes from a Hollywood producer who has read her play and wants to interview her for a new film project. Mia resumes her journey with great reluctance, goes to the interview, and is rewarded with a job that transforms her career path, and life forever.

Transformation is not a consequence of mountain highs; it is a result of mountain highs, valley lows and faithful steps throughout the plains of life. True transformation is less about a singular event and more about a series of them, and transformation and the effects of it are unpredictable.

Two summers during college I chose to work as a camp counselor at Heartland Camp just outside of Kansas City, Missouri. This seemed like a good option for me because I loved Jesus and I loved kids. I had been a Sunday school teacher for years and liked the idea of working at a Christian camp. And I was very excited about being a high school history teacher upon graduation and I worked with children and youth every chance I got. As you might expect, during my time there I experienced many “mountain highs,” constantly reminded of God’s presence in children, in nature, in laughter, camping outside under the stars, singing praise songs at the campfire, how could I not?

My faith was nurtured, and formed in significant ways during those summers. I experienced those highs, and afterwards I faithfully took steps toward becoming a high school history teacher. Never once did I connect those experiences with becoming a pastor. But years later, as I began seminary, I could see how God used that camping time in my life, not to help me gain wisdom about teenagers as I assumed, but to gain knowledge about God, and serving God in leadership. Those events were key in my transformation to becoming a pastor, but I certainly didn’t recognize them as such at the time.

That’s how I think James, Peter and John would look back on the transfiguration. It was an awesome event that was essential to the certainty of their faith and belief in Jesus as Lord. But they only recognized that after the journey toward Jerusalem and witnessing Jesus death and rising. All of those things are what convinced them.

We have come once again to our journey toward Jerusalem, commencing with Ash Wednesday in just a few days. We begin to walk in Jesus’ Ways of justice, humility, and forgiveness as we repent for the all the ways we have taken unfaithful steps, steps away from God and away from all that is good. We have never before walked the journey in this time, in this place. Like the disciples, we come down from the mountain, with God’s statement: “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to HIM.” It is ringing in our ears. We have had the mountain top experience. We rejoice that Jesus was at the same time human and God. We are convinced; we try our best to hear him. Some days it is hard. But we put one foot in front of the other and faithfully move forward in Jesus’ ways, convinced that together with God, we are getting closer to transformation, closer to living life abundant, just as God intends. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Culpepper, R. Alan. 1995. “Luke” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Volume IX. Luke and John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.