

CHANGING FACES IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

LUKE 9:28-43

Sometime between the first Mardi Gras and the Saints first Super Bowl, New Orleans was decimated by Hurricane Katrina. I say “decimated,” because this term refers not only to great destruction, harm and a drastic reduction in population; it also refers random acts of violence and unfair taxation on the poor. Natural disasters are natural, but there was something unnatural, inhumane even, about the lack of preparation for---and response to---Hurricane Katrina.

In August 2005, the world changed. Since then, it has changed again and again. Ask the people of Haiti. It is just that some changes are more profound than others. Some changes leave us breathless as we stand in awe of the greatness of God. Peter, John and James are there this morning. So are you and I.

You may remember Hurricane Katrina better than I do, because most of you were here, and I was not. Even though I was deeply involved with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance at the time, I never made it to New Orleans. Gautier, Mississippi, yes. New Orleans, not quite. Still, there was plenty of work to do and suffering to embrace between here and there.

This experience was not unlike my experiences of Presbyterian Border Ministry in that I bumped up against a limitation every time that I turned around. In Gautier, I had to leave the heavy-lifting to others, but I did learn how to remove carpet and measure and cut insulation. I remember busting rock on a mountainside in Mexico with an attorney, who, at one point asked me, “What is that Ph.D. in religion worth about now?” And I said, “About as much as a degree from law school.”

I am sure that you have experiences that have taught you how fragile life is and how what you think you do well is contingent upon: (1) an opportunity to do whatever it is that you think you do well; and (2) a community in which you feel that your gifts are appreciated. And maybe you will have the chance to share a related story with someone special sometime soon.

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At work in Luke's Transfiguration story are circumstances that are both unusual and extraordinary. Individuals face limitations, personal limitations and limitations of their faith tradition. Peter, John and James follow Jesus up a mountain where Jesus' face changes, and when Jesus' face changes, so do theirs.

The appearance of Jesus' face changes while he prays. Yes, prayer changes the face of things. When we pray, we are like children who crawl into the lap of one who loves us dearly, one who knows us and loves us more fully than we know or love ourselves.

Jesus' face changes; his clothes become dazzling white. What I would like to know is how this affects Jesus' understanding of himself and his mission. What does he know about his relationship with the God to whom he prays? He knows that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. He knows that this Spirit has anointed him to proclaim, release and recover. He has been set apart to let the oppressed go free. Beginning with his baptism, Jesus' life, at least in Luke's Gospel, is one epiphany after another. Now his world is changing again, and it is changing suddenly.

Suddenly, Peter, James and John see Moses and Elijah talking to him. Luke says that, "They appeared in glory" (as if they could appear in any other way). Then Luke dangles another plot thread by saying, "They were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." Departure? Jerusalem?

Next there is an editorial note: "Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him." Weighed down. Past tense. If I had just climbed a mountain, I would be sleepy, too. Mountain-climbing is exhausting work, especially for those of us who are not built to climb. Peter and his companions are exhausted, and yet they persevere, and because they persevere in the face of difficult circumstances, they catch a glimpse of God's glory.

God's glory is something to behold. Stories of Moses and Elijah suggest as much. Peter celebrates God's glory at first. Then he is afraid. His initial response is, "Yes, Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings"---a church, a student center and a residential property (no, that is not what Peter says; that is what we would do) ---"let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Peter's speech is interrupted. The Spirit of God interrupts Peter's plans for the group: "While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud." They are terrified, and yet they enter the cloud anyway. God's grace is irresistible, and the Spirit of God compels us to be and do what God would have us to be and do.

There, in the cloud, Peter, John and James confront limitations, personal limitations and limitations of their faith tradition. There, a voice speaks. The mystery of faith is proclaimed: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Is "Chosen" another way of saying "Beloved"? I do not know. Suddenly, the circumstances seem darker. Maybe it is the clouds.

Then there are the questions, "What is Moses? What happened to Elijah?" They were just here. Now they have disappeared: "When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." Silence. Is this silence spirituality or fear? Is it both?

Following Moses' disappearance, it is legitimate to ask, "What happened to the Law?" With Elijah's disappearance, one has to wonder, "What happened to the prophets?" The Law and the prophets are fulfilled. Well, almost...

Remember since the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem, I have pointed out again and again how intricately designed and beautifully written Luke's story is, and this is another example. In Jesus Christ, the Law is sharpened, and yet its capacity to forgive deepens. In Jesus Christ, prophetic preaching leads

to charges of blasphemy and sedition, and yet the world's understanding of who is blessed and who is cursed is redefined (and it is not what many expect).

The Transfiguration in Luke's Gospel sets the table for a story that follows the Institution of the Lord's Supper. Remember the one about Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives? Jesus leads the disciples up the mountain and asks them to pray. "Pray," he says, "so that you will not come into the time of trial." Then he steps behind a veil. Actually, Scripture says, "He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down and prayed to the One in heaven, 'If you are willing remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.'" Oh, to have the courage to pray this prayer and mean it! Oh, to be obedient enough not to add an "and if you want my opinion" clause!

Jesus' circumstances are beginning to change. The body that he had been given will be crucified soon, and what does God do for this Beloved, Chosen One? God sends an angel to give him strength. Jesus prays and prays again. He prays more earnestly. His sweat becomes like drops of blood falling on the ground. As soon as he steps out from behind the veil, he finds the disciples sleeping. Before beating them up or calling them lazy, please note that in Luke's Gospel, the disciples sleep "because of grief." They understand that Jesus' circumstances are changing, and they understand that if Jesus' circumstances change, their circumstances will be changing, too.

In Luke's Gospel, grief is associated with drastic change, with random acts of violence and unfair taxation on the poor. Suffering, like the suffering we continue to hear about in Haiti, like the suffering that our neighbors at the University of Alabama at Huntsville are experiencing, has to be endured. In circumstances like these, change does not come quickly enough. Where there is grief, God's Spirit abides. Where there is suffering, God intervenes, even when we are impatient with waiting.

In Luke's Gospel, Transfiguration is followed by healing, and it is healing for which we pray this morning. We pray that suffering will cease, that sorrow will be swallowed by joy and that the light of God's love will shine brilliantly in a world that is truly and ultimately beautiful.

On that next day, when Jesus, Peter, John and James come down the mountain without commandments chiseled in stone or Moses or Elijah holding their hands, somebody asks Jesus for help. A father explains that his only child is suddenly seized by a spirit, which causes the child to shriek, convulse and foam at the mouth. Jesus' disciples had offered to help, but, in the end, everybody recognized that the healing this child required comes only from Jesus.

With the weight of the world and all Jewish traditions on his shoulders and feeling alone, Jesus lashes out at the father: "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I bear with you? Bring your son here." A grumpy, lonely Savior rebukes the unclean spirit, and healing takes place, and Scripture concludes with the simple observation: "All were astounded at the greatness of God."

God's greatness is astounding. God's grace feeds us when we feel eaten away by sin, shortcomings and/or personal limitations. God's love is transfiguring when we look out at a world marred by death, destruction and violence, and God's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, and in Jesus Christ, suffering ends. Children are healed, and beloved, thanks be to God that we are God's children and so are our neighbors who suffer next door and on the other side of the world. To the blessed and only Sovereign, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.