

Transfigured  
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
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**Exodus 24:12-18**

12The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

15Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

**Matthew 17: 1 - 9**

1Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The man had been a drinker, before becoming a preacher. His life was okay, not horrible, but not great either. But the truth of it was that he had a broken place inside of him, and he'd sought to fix the undiagnosed brokenness with alcohol. It wasn't a new story, but it was his story, and it was clear as he sat in my office how real it still was to him.

He was one of my new colleagues in this little rural town I had come to serve. I'd been on the job only a few weeks. Fresh from seminary. Straight to seminary from college. Reformed theology had claimed me and nurtured me since my birth and baptism. The road hadn't always been easy, but I'd never been separated from the church.

But this world in rural America, the small church, was a new one to me, and I wasn't sure what to expect from this colleague at a local Pentecostal church. He'd not made an appointment, just pulled up in the church parking lot one day and come on into my office to introduce myself and tell me his story.

He'd been a drinker. Long time. Until one night, when it all, dramatically, came crashing down on him. This part of his story was real, too. He sat there and told me how Jesus came to him, physically, spiritually, appeared to him, and saved him. Saved his life. Saved his soul. Called him to ministry. He hadn't had a drink since that night. It hadn't been easy, but he'd done it, with Jesus' help. Giving Jesus the credit, he had lived a different life since then. It had been September 24, 1989 that had happened. At 11:14 P.M. I could tell as he sat there that each moment, feeling, sensation was before him as if it was yesterday.

That I believed he'd probably had an alcohol induced hallucination was irrelevant. I knew it was irrelevant. I could tell his story was true to him. And even with little experience in ministry I knew it was a privilege to hear his story. Sacred space.

But I was still a little unclear about the purpose of his visit. He got to that shortly.

Having told me how he had been saved, when he had been saved, by whom he had been saved, he wanted to know how I had come to be saved. When I had been saved and accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior.

I must have answered him 12 different ways.

I started with my theological positions.

Then moved on to a description of my childhood church.

I hadn't been saved, I'd always known the love of God.

Hadn't ever been separated from it.

I hadn't been saved, Jesus had walked with me since birth, even when I didn't see him.

The Pentecostal preacher sitting in my office was stubborn, and wouldn't give in.

Wouldn't accept my answer.

I was stubborn, I wouldn't give in.

I wasn't going to change my answer.

And after a while it became clear there was no middle ground.

We parted as colleagues.

Over the years I would preach at his church as a part of our local ministerium pulpit exchange. He would preach in my church.

It's been almost twenty years since then.

I look back on it and realize that I would answer his questions in exactly the same way.

But I'd understand his story differently.

I'd give his story far more credibility than I did back then.

After almost 20 years in ordained ministry, I'm more ready to believe that Jesus **did** appear to my colleague that night, and saved his life.

I'm far more willing to admit that there is mystery and miracle in this world that we do not, cannot, are not intended to explain or understand.

And today, I'll be the first to admit, I can't tell you with any certainty what Peter, James, and John saw on that mountaintop, or how it happened, this transformation of Jesus into a conversation with Moses and Elijah, giving way to God's voice and instruction. An event that is recorded by three of the gospels.

I don't know if or why the laws of time and space were broken, but I'm far less likely to explain it away as a dream or having some other rational explanation.

I'm far more willing to trust their testimony. To trust that something happened that really, rationally, should never have happened.

And that I don't have to understand it to accept it. I can let it be remain a mystery.

Are we open to mysteries?

Are we open to a faith that leaves things unanswered?

That some things are above our pay grade?

I think this is a particular challenge to Presbyterians, because we've spend generations, centuruies, really reminding people that faith should include our minds as well as our hearts.

We've founded schools.

Fought for justice.

Encouraged science.

I can't tell you how many times I have repeated the words of scholar William Temple, who once wrote: "next to a life of love the human mind in the service of God is the most wonderful thing in all the world."

And it's true,

But the accounts of the transfiguration remind us of the other end of the equation.

We're not supposed to leave our hearts at home, either.

Pastor Donald Luther offers:<sup>1</sup>

We long for the *mysterion*. We sense, we know, some have experienced indelibly the elusive presence. We sense most deeply that it doesn't exist only in us or for us. As Muir [the poet] queried, "Was the change in us alone?" A careful look at any of the synoptic accounts makes it clear that the very way of telling the story sets the events outside the lives of those who were present, as well as those of the evangelists who entered it into the church's written memory. The point, I think, is not that we should go looking for evidence that might demonstrate the historicity of what happened. Nor is the point to explain on the basis of the texts the interior psychic goings-on of Peter,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/21-1\\_therapy\\_theology/21-1\\_luther.pdf](http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/21-1_therapy_theology/21-1_luther.pdf)

James, and John. Like the poem, the event of the elusive presence stands outside of us, *extra nos*, beckoning, alluring, addressing us, even as it escapes our grasp. *Mysterion*

Or, as one of my favorite songwriters and singers, Iris Dement, sings,<sup>2</sup>  
 Everybody's wonderin' what and where they they all came from  
 Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go  
 When the whole thing's done  
 But no one knows for certain  
 And so it's all the same to me  
 I think I'll just let the mystery be

Are we open to mystery?  
 To miracle?  
 To the transfiguration of Jesus?  
 To seeing Jesus dazzle?

Wendell Berry says, “I see that the life of this place is always emerging beyond expectation or prediction or typicality, that it is unique, given to the world minute by minute, only once, never to be repeated. And this is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving. We are alive within mystery, by miracle.”<sup>3</sup>

To be alive within mystery means that we are irreversibly, irrevocably open to our own transformation, our own transfiguration, through the power of Jesus, God, through whom all things are possible.

Are we open to mystery?  
 To miracle?  
 To the transfiguration of Jesus?  
 And to our own?

That’s the good news.

The tough news is what comes next.  
 Because the transfiguration isn’t the end of the story, it’s the beginning.  
 The conversation by Jesus wasn’t the end of alcohol addiction for my colleague, it was the beginning of his sobriety and new life in Christ.

Fred Craddock describes it:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://irisdement.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlaoR5m4L80>

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*

<sup>4</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) page 135.

“This is a mountaintop experience but not the kind about which persons write glowingly of sunrises, soft breezes, warm friends, music, and quiet time. On this mountain the subject is death, and the frightening presence of God reduces those present to silence.”

It’s true. Peter is busy talking about how they can stay on that mountaintop when God interrupts him. And says, ““This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

With him I am well pleased, words echoing the words God uttered at Jesus’ baptism. Not words the disciples would have connected to his baptism, because they weren’t there, but words we, the listening, the reader will, and are intended, to connect.

Listen to him, God says.

Listen to him talking with Moses and Elijah. He can’t do this alone. Neither can you.  
 Listen to him when he tells you that this is about living a new way, that changes the world.  
 Listen to him when he tells you he will be put to death. He’s not making that up.  
 Listen to him when he tells you he needs you to pray for him, with him. Don’t fall asleep!  
 Listen to him. Not just here. Not just now. But keep listening to him.  
 Listen to him. Don’t be so busy trying to do faith that you forget to be faith.  
 Listen to him.

The words of God are not a salve to the soul of these disciples who are witnessing something beyond their comprehension. It terrifies them.<sup>5</sup>

Brian Stoffregen comments:<sup>6</sup>

These cowering, scared-stiff disciples, who are hiding their heads; are raised by Jesus to a new life. Ironically, it is not the "glowing," glorified Jesus who does it, but the down-to-earth, human Jesus who comes and touches and speaks to the disciples.

The disciples are transformed from fearful, anxious, inactive, cowards to brave, confident, active, champions of the faith. How much do we need this healing, life-giving, transforming touch from Jesus?

On this week of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, we must come down off of the mountain to walk with Jesus. To enter the wilderness. To see what path we take towards Jerusalem and all that will happen there.

To make this journey we must be open. To possibility. To mystery. To understanding. To hope. We must bring our minds. And we must bring our hearts.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/02/transforming-vision.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt17x1.htm>

From artist Jan Richardson:<sup>7</sup>

Believe me, I know  
 how tempting it is  
 to remain inside this blessing,  
 to linger where everything  
 is dazzling  
 and clear.

We could build walls  
 around this blessing,  
 put a roof over it.  
 We could bring in  
 a table, chairs,  
 have the most amazing meals.  
 We could make a home.  
 We could stay.

But this blessing  
 is built for leaving.  
 This blessing  
 is made for coming down  
 the mountain.  
 This blessing  
 wants to be in motion,  
 to travel with you  
 as you return  
 to level ground.

It will seem strange  
 how quiet this blessing becomes  
 when it returns to earth.  
 It is not shy.  
 It is not afraid.

It simply knows  
 how to bide its time,  
 to watch and wait,  
 to discern and pray

until the moment comes  
 when it will reveal  
 everything it knows,  
 when it will shine forth  
 with all that it has seen,  
 when it will dazzle  
 with the unforgettable light  
 you have carried  
 all this way.

Amen.  
 and Amen.

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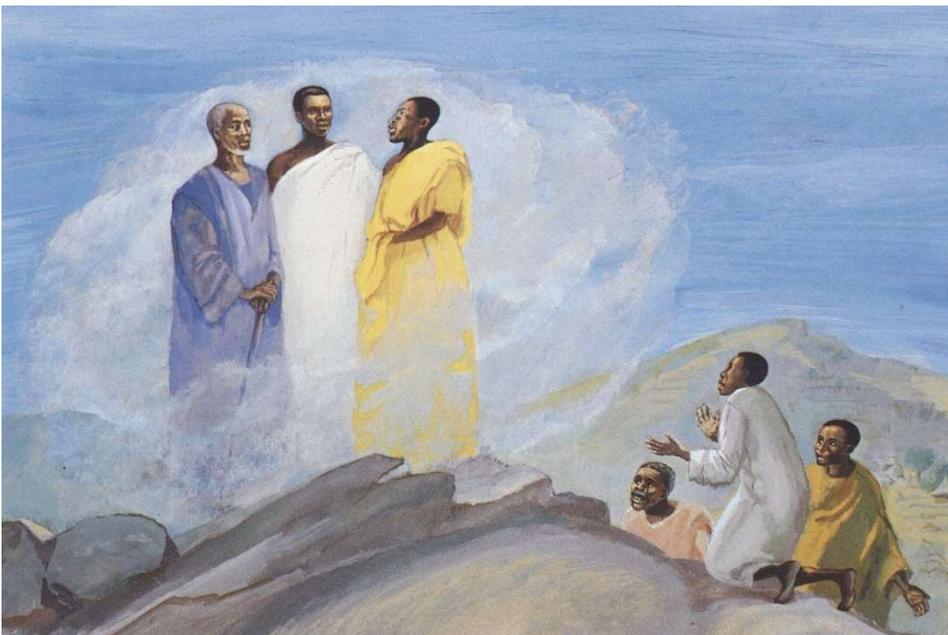
<sup>7</sup> <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/02/05/transfiguration-sunday-a-blessing-made-for-coming-down-the-mountain/>



The Transfiguration with Christ flanked  
by two saints and with the Apostles below

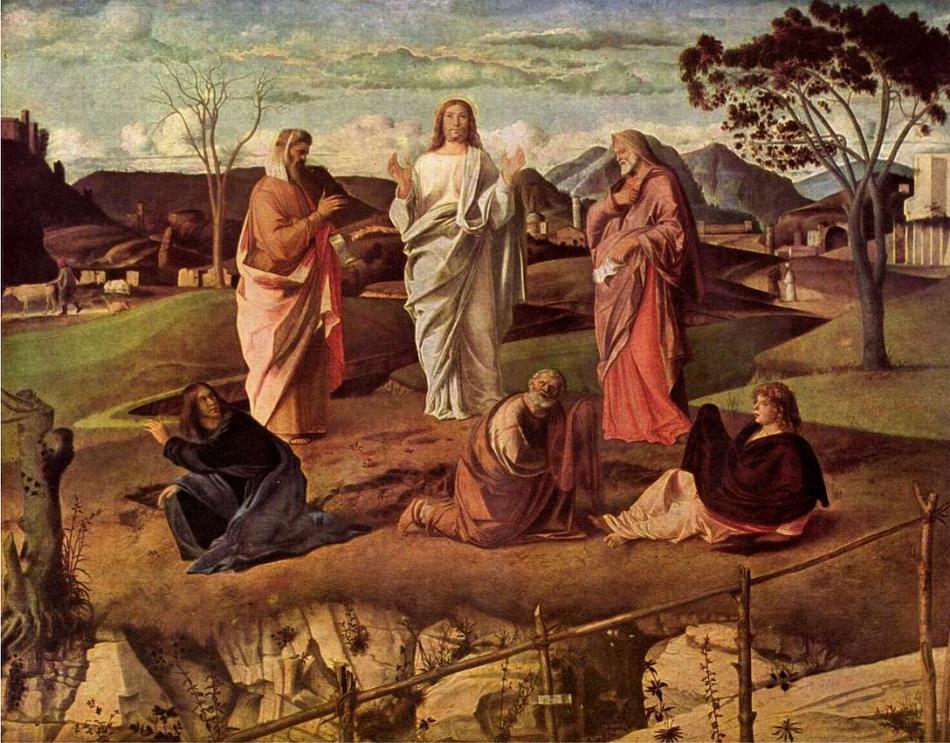
Cherubino Alberti (Zaccaria Mattia)  
(Italian, Borgo Sansepolcro 1553–1615 Rome)  
1570–1615.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/652242?sortBy=Relevance&ft=transfiguration&offset=0&rpp=100&pos=24>



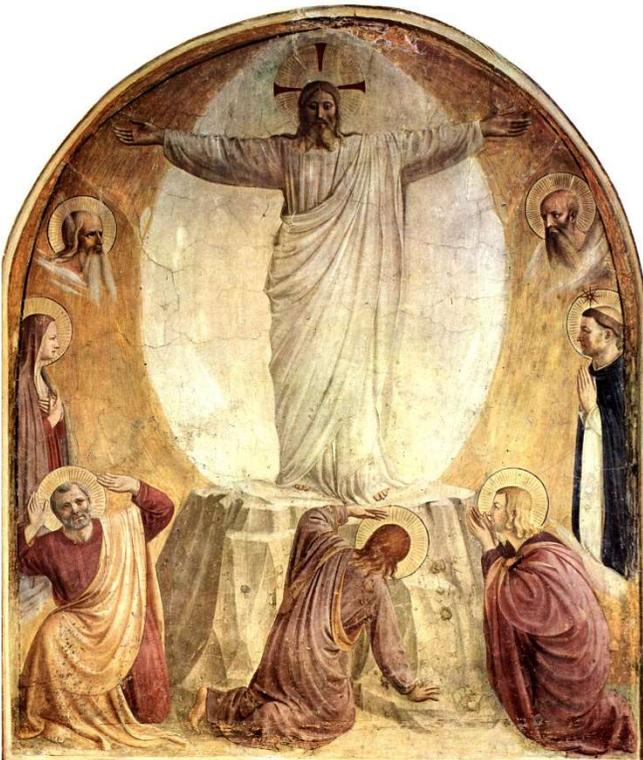
JESUS MAFA. Transfiguration,  
from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a  
project of the Vanderbilt Divinity  
Library, Nashville,  
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TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=4830Z> [retrieved February 26, 2017]

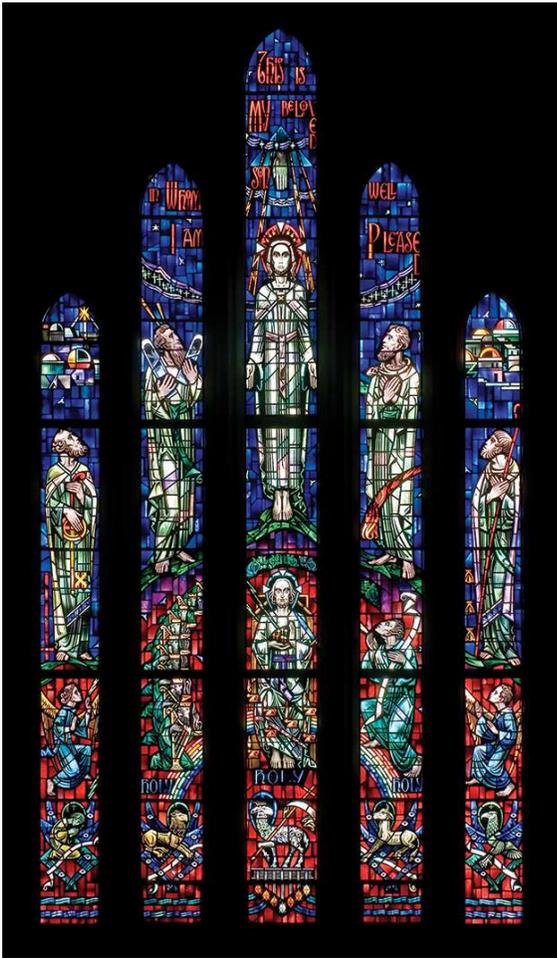


Bellini, Giovanni, d. 1516.  
Transfiguration of Christ, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville,

TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=47774> [retrieved February 26, 2017]. Original source: <http://www.yorckproject.de>.



Angelico, fra, ca. 1400–1455. Transfiguration, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville,  
TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=46565> [retrieved February 26, 2017].



The Transfiguration window in Boe Memorial Chapel on the campus of St. Olaf College... The window is appropriately south-facing, and when the sun is shining, the window itself is nearly transfigured.

In this window, designed and completed by the Conrad Pickel Studio of Waukesha, Wisconsin, the fulfilled promises of the Old Testament are represented in the figures of Moses and Elijah, who flank Jesus, with Peter and James beside them and John below. The lower section of the window addresses the theme of the New Jerusalem, as mentioned in the Revelation of John.

<https://www.stolaf.edu/singforjoy/read/post/130>