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2 Cor 3:12-4:6

Since we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Raiment Glistening

Some of the stories of Jesus make easier sense than others. When we read a story of him healing someone, we know what it's talking about. We've seen people healed, not usually instantly or miraculously, usually slowly and with doctors help, but we get it, we can imagine it. Or when we hear of Jesus teaching, we've all been taught, many in this room are teachers, we understand the activity (SLIDE 1).¹ In our story for today Jesus is transfigured. He stands before his friends and he is changed, his clothes made dazzling white, in older English his raiment glistens. He sees and speaks with Moses and Elijah. And then the Father's voice booms from a cloud. If we've all experienced healing, teaching, we haven't likely experienced a transfiguration. Have we? Hear this word.

Mk 9:1-8

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." Six days later, Jesus took with

¹ <http://www.artstann.com/mckillip%20christian%20gallery5.htm> (third image down)

him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, thanks be to God.

I started by saying we haven't experienced a transfiguration. That is, a time when the veil over reality is pulled back just a bit and we can see things for what they really are: created by God, filled with the light of Christ, on their way to redemption. There's a curve in the highway at Blowing Rock on the way to Lenoir where you can see the mountains off to the right—near where Canyon's Restaurant is. Every time I turn there I think, ok, this is dangerously beautiful, watch the road. Then just a glimpse of the peaks to the right reveals more blue than there should be in the world, or more fog than God has in the fog machine, or a sunset or sunrise where the world turns to fire and you can't hardly breathe. It's moments like that where I feel really sorry for atheists. When your soul says "thank you" before your brain can stop it in moments like that, who do they praise?

Jesus' earliest disciples were convinced he was coming back right away to judge the world and save his people. Some gave up possessions, others didn't get married, why plan for the future when the end is near? A pastor friend of mine says this is still true, he always gives this advice, "Don't buy green bananas." You never know, Jesus might come back. Ancient Christians thought this because Jesus said things like this in our scripture, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." The writer of our gospel text, St. Mark, was a disciple of St. Peter. There's a story in the ancient church that when Mark asked Peter if he couldn't write down some of Jesus' stories that Peter didn't much care. If he wanted he could. This is where the first gospel comes from, our most precious book where we learn about God, why was Peter so ambivalent? Because Jesus' return was coming. Why do we need a book about his stories? Good thing Mark won that argument.

You can see why Peter had confidence in Jesus' return. Look at what he had witnessed. Peter and James and John were led up a high mountain (SLIDE 2).² Jesus' clothes became a white so dazzling, the text says, no bleach on the earth could bleach them that way. And then Moses and Elijah turned up to chat with Jesus. "This is wonderful!" Peter says, putting his foot in his mouth like always. "Can't I make some tents so Moses and Elijah

² <http://www.jesusmafa.com/anglais/imag27.htm>

can stick around?" And a cloud appears, a voice from the cloud says "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" If you'd seen that, you could believe Jesus would be back soon. You might even listen to the voice and do what Jesus said.

One way to read this story is to think about spiritual mountain top experiences. Times when we're particularly close to God and we want things to stay that way. Times when we go away, normally to a camp or a retreat or even to church, and meet Jesus in a special way. Many of you in this church have been blessed by participating in the Walk to Emmaus, an organization designed to help lay people fall more deeply in love with Jesus. If someone in our church is a leader I tend to assume they've done Emmaus, it's become a standard way we Methodists grow in our faith and become a source of radiant joy to others. I myself have often gone to monasteries, places where you pray 8 times a day and stay silent otherwise, where I learn to hunger for prayer. On any sort of retreat we can want to stay on the mountaintop. Back home there are bills to pay, kids to watch, work to be done, regular life. You go from singing songs to Jesus with friends old and new to having to run back out to the store because we ran out of milk. The real world is a drag. But we have to live here. Nobody gets to stay on the mountaintop. The air is thin up there anyway, our faith has to be lived out in the real world. I myself came to believe in Jesus at a camp. Made some of the best friends I ever had there, fell in love with a different girl every year, but most of all, I could see a different way of life was possible. I could live as a follower of Jesus every day. I could tell other people about him. And I could have more fun doing that than anything else! The sky over the lake caught fire at sunset every night and so did I. But we couldn't stay there. We had to go back to our lives. It's a little odd if you think of it—you can worship Jesus in church Sunday by Sunday, but it's almost like you have to get away someplace else to make a decision for Jesus, to have your whole life turned upside down for Jesus. We have to go up the mountain to come back down again different. I have an aunt and uncle who say their church is the Grand Canyon. They go every year and it's like worship for them. We can all understand that—to be in the presence of something massive, different, something no human could make or bottle or sell, it inspires awe. Here's the thing about such experiences, they're good, if you haven't had one I want to encourage you to do Emmaus or something similar. But at the end of them we must do what the voice in cloud says. We must listen to Jesus. Without that, all we were doing was killing time. Without listening to Jesus all any of us is ever doing is wasting away.

Let me back up and spend some more time with the details in this story. There are clues here like those that any mystery novelist will leave, if we only pay attention. Jesus promises some there will see his coming. Then six days later he takes his friends up the mountain. Six days—like the number of days in which God created everything. And what did God say on the first day? Let there be light. Here on the mountain top Jesus is changed into light itself, dazzling, unbearable, to show he's the light by which God creates the

universe (SLIDE 3).³ In Christian art depicting this scene Jesus is actually up off the ground, with great flames and flashes of light coming from him—imagine depicting an event like this 1900 years before electric light is invented (SLIDE 4).⁴ Or here Jesus’s light knocks the disciples down, it looks like lasers. That’s how grace works sometimes. Jesus is light itself. And he’s not alone. Moses and Elijah appear with him. Not an everyday event. Or is it? When we say the Apostles’ Creed in here we profess belief in the communion of the saints. You and I might think of our dead grandparents or friends right here with us at the Lord’s Table. We should also think of Moses and Elijah, Jesus and Peter and Paul, John Wesley and Mother Teresa, right here with us, chatting with Jesus. In the story Moses and Elijah suggest the living and the dead. Moses died at the end of Deuteronomy, but Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot and so never died. The point: Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead, you and me and everyone who’s ever lived. Moses and Elijah also represent the law and the prophets. The whole bible only exists to point to the one lit up on the mountain. Peter suggests that he could build them three tabernacles, not just three tents. He’s suggesting they celebrate the festival of booths, remembering when Israel camped in the wilderness with God’s very presence. Then the cloud covers them and the voice booms that boomed at Jesus’ baptism. Like the cloud that followed the Israelites in the wilderness, that covered Mount Sinai as Moses talked with God. There’s a lot going on here! And what’s it all for? In Luke’s story of the Transfiguration Jesus discusses with Moses and Elijah his *Exodus*. His going to his cross is his way of being Israel and bringing God’s salvation.

Now however much we might experience when we go away to find God at camp or a monastery or the Grand Canyon it’s not as spiritually packed as all that, is it? What would it mean to see God’s transfiguring glory in our lives? I worked on this sermon at a hotel room in mighty Gastonia, looking out the window at the exit off of I-85—Outback steakhouse, Carmax, Waffle House. What would a scene like that look like transfigured, shot through with glory, made resplendent with Jesus’ lordship?

The church has often associated some animals with Jesus’ presence (IMAGE 5).⁵ I have an image of a pelican on my business card, and it’s not because I miss the beach. The

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_by_Lodovico_Carracci.jpg

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http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_pMqNaWEUTt8/S7pKNjYAqI/AAAAAAAAEmA/C7OpqbkWHy0/s1600/4,%2BExample%2B2a,%2BThe%2BSaviour%27s%2BTransfiguration,%2BAn%2BBearly-15th%2Bcentury%2Bicon%2Bfrom%2Bthe%2BTretyakov%2BGallery.%2Battributed%2Bto%2BTheophanes%2Bthe%2BGreek.jpeg&imgrefurl=http://revpatrickcomerford.blogspot.com/2010/04/transfiguration-finding-meaning-in.html&h=1600&w=1152&sz=703&tbnid=Rd7ej2TRbvWQdM:&tbnh=90&tbnw=65&zoom=1&docid=vHth2pASgizOnM&sa=X&ei=3Hk-T9_6Guy10QHQ5IypBw&ved=0CDEQ9QFwAg&dur=472

⁵ <http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://static.ddmcdn.com/gif/pelican-1.jpg&imgrefurl=http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/life/zoology/birds/pelican-bill-vs->

ancient and medieval church saw a pelican as an image of Christ (IMAGE 6).⁶ They thought mother pelicans fed their young by tearing off bits of their own flesh. And they said what an image for God, who feeds us with his flesh in Christ. A peacock has often been taken as an image for Christ, even for his transfiguration. Normally it's a rather ordinary looking sort of turkey (IMAGE 7).⁷ Until it opens its tail feathers. Then it is transfigured. Changed. Flannery O'Connor, the great southern writer, wrote of a meeting with one of those birds. "The birds reached the middle of the lawn. The cock stopped suddenly and curving its neck backwards, he raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise. Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The man stood transfixed, his jaw slack. 'Christ will come like that!' he said in a loud voice, and wiped his hand over his mouth and stood there, gaping . . . The transfiguration. He came to redeem us." Here's how this works. I tell you about a pelican or a peacock as an image for Jesus. Next time you see one you think of Jesus. And a small bit of creation does what all creation is supposed to do—bear witness to the one who creates it and redeems it in Christ. And the landscape looks slightly more transfigured.

On my and Jaylynn's wedding day we had our passage from Paul read, with its glorious promise that we are changed from one degree of glory into another. My friend who read it has cerebral palsy. He can walk a little, but it's difficult for him, he uses a cane or leans on someone's arm. It took him a while to get to the pulpit. He speaks with a bit of a stammer. And as he read Paul's promise that "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," I wondered—when my friend is transformed, will he have his disability? Will he limp and stutter? If not, will he still be him, without that which makes him him? It was precisely in my friend's inability, and the passage's description of glory, that beauty arose. In the world beauty is ability, strength, performance, production, but my friend needs several minutes to travel 20 feet, and several minutes more than the rest of us to read a passage of the bible, and he's beautiful, precisely in his disability, glory shines. What will transfiguration mean for him? Don't tell my wife that I spoke of my friend as the most beautiful thing on my wedding day.

Many of you see transfigurations all the time. You teachers see it when your students bloom. Sometimes you're not even sure why they do, they just do, something they

[belly.htm&h=300&w=400&sz=12&tbnid=ZnoQTSdTMiJg5M:&tbnh=84&tbnw=112&zoom=1&docid=EjsIeCOoEH0olM&sa=X&ei=KXo-T6uwGcnz0gG2_-CkBw&ved=0CGoQ9QEwDQ&dur=748](http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_zYu2MdAxIk/S88m6qelwal/AAAAAAAEKI/q_V5jIjL4jY/s1600/pelican.gif&imgrefurl=http://www.vastpublicindifference.com/2010/04/gravestone-of-day-mary-brackett.html&h=438&w=408&sz=145&tbnid=SqDKg1iIB4HeKM:&tbnh=99&tbnw=92&zoom=1&docid=6K3fhhqqrz-VDZM&sa=X&ei=X3s-T5H7HOTm0QHlorneBw&ved=0CDEQ9QEwAQ&dur=630)

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http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_zYu2MdAxIk/S88m6qelwal/AAAAAAAEKI/q_V5jIjL4jY/s1600/pelican.gif&imgrefurl=http://www.vastpublicindifference.com/2010/04/gravestone-of-day-mary-brackett.html&h=438&w=408&sz=145&tbnid=SqDKg1iIB4HeKM:&tbnh=99&tbnw=92&zoom=1&docid=6K3fhhqqrz-VDZM&sa=X&ei=X3s-T5H7HOTm0QHlorneBw&ved=0CDEQ9QEwAQ&dur=630

⁷ <http://www.itsnature.org/ground/birds-land/the-peacock/>

couldn't do before now they can and no rose ever opened to resplendently or smelled more sweet. I've seen marriages transfigured before, when the couple remembers why they fell in love in the first place and they do so again, only with more wisdom this time around. I know a 102 year old woman who goes to the beach every year with her family, and as soon as she sees the ocean she walks out there, throws her hands up and cries "Glory!" One day all of creation, from the drab businesses off the highway to the Grand Canyon, from the smallest church to the largest, from the most non-Christian people to the holiest, will say the same, glory, when Christ comes in full beauty and we all fall down in the worship.

In the meantime the church is the booth that Peter tried to make for the Lord on the mountain. We're a little tent set up to bask in the presence of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as they discuss the truth of things. We're the place that announces to the world "He is Lord. Listen to him." We are those whose lives look different for having caught a glimpse of his beauty. Lord, it is wonderful to be here, can't we stay? And God himself ignores us to say "This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him." Amen.