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**Title:** Keeping Jesus

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Today, we are on the verge of changing seasons again in the church year. In the church calendar, the seasons change pretty quickly early in the year, and then there's one really long season later in the year. Today we say goodbye to the season of Epiphany that began back on January 6, right on the heels of Advent and Christmas. On Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent, that 40-day period (not counting Sundays) leading up to Easter. The Sunday before the season of Lent—TODAY—is called Transfiguration Sunday as the assigned scripture reading for the day is always the story that you heard read this morning, although not always from Mark.

The scripture passage is about a high point. It's literally a high point because it takes place on a mountain. But a high point as well because it is a spiritual experience that is out of the ordinary. We take the name from the verses from Mark that says that once Jesus was on the mountain with Peter, James, and John, he was "transfigured" before them. That means his appearance changed, and in fact, his clothes started glowing. Thus, this event has been called "The Transfiguration."

Transfigure is a funny word. We don't use that word hardly at all in normal everyday language. The original Greek word is "metamorphosis," which actually is a word that is easy to translate into English—it's "metamorphosis"<sup>1</sup>—a word we use in English way more often than we use "transfigure." Pretty much everyone has studied frogs or butterflies at some point in school. From that, you know that metamorphosis means to change appearance. A tadpole and a frog are the same creature, but they look very different.

Today's story is about metamorphosis. Something is happening in this story that is very important. Three disciples go up the mountain with Jesus—Peter, James, and John—and they have a spiritual experience. People who lived long ago are suddenly there talking to Jesus. And it's not just anybody. It's Moses and Elijah, two great prophets in Israel's history. At the same time, there is a dramatic change in Jesus' appearance, and the disciples are terrified. And to top everything off, there is a voice from heaven: "This

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/metamorphosis>

is my beloved son, listen to him!” Sound familiar? It’s almost the exact same words that Jesus heard when he was baptized, but this time the words are directed to the disciples. And they are told, “Listen to him.”<sup>2</sup>

There’s a lot to wonder about in this story. We’re used to being confused about stories that Jesus told here and there, but at least most of the parables are things that we understand. The mystery of the transfiguration, however, ranks right up there with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus in the 1-2-3 of great mysteries that leave us wondering, “How did that happen?” From that wondering, we might be able to glean a message that Mark and the others that wrote about this story have for us.

The first thing to glean from this strange story is CONFIRMATION THAT JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD.

One of the things to wonder about is why this spiritual experience happens here, at this point in time. If we put this in context and go back to chapter 8 of Mark, Jesus has just told the disciples that he must suffer and die. The disciples, or at least Peter, had a very negative reaction to this statement, the biggest negative reaction to anything that Jesus ever says. The disciples didn’t understand this whole suffering business at all; they disagreed with Jesus about this. It’s no coincidence, I think, that right after Peter disagrees with Jesus, we get a voice from God on the mountain saying to the disciples, “Listen to him.”

There wasn’t a voice from heaven after Jesus said the beatitudes, or after Jesus told them to love one another. The disciples might not have fully understood everything Jesus told them, but there is only one time when they totally outright disagree with him. And that is over the issue of Jesus having to suffer and die. And that’s when the confirmation comes from God. If the disciples had any doubts about whether Jesus was the Messiah, the presence of Moses and Elijah would certainly help them to figure it out, combined with Jesus’ transfiguration and the voice from heaven.

Speaking of Moses and Elijah, it is important that Jesus be seen in the lineage of the greatest prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Here’s a piece that was new to me as I studied for this sermon. Do you know the final words of the Old Testament—that Hebrew Bible? I won’t call on you to recite it out loud but let me remind you. It’s your trivia for the day.

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, and the last words of the book of Malachi are these:

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse. (Malachi 4:4-6)

Moses and Elijah close out the Old Testament, and now there is a trio on the mountain that adds Jesus to that mix. Given how the Old Testament ends, it makes perfect sense that these two would appear with Jesus as the new age is dawning there on the mountaintop. God sends Moses and Elijah to talk to Jesus. Moses and Elijah are familiar with mountaintop experiences. Moses met God on a mountain, when he first saw the burning bush, and again when he went up Mt. Sinai. Elijah met God on the mountain, too, not in the thunder or the wind, but in the silence. Both faced persecution for doing God’s will, and that fate will come to Jesus as well. The second thing then to glean from this mysterious story is that JESUS STANDS IN THE LINE PROMISED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary help from “Why We Need the Transfiguration” by Karoline Lewis, February 8, 2015 article found at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

In the season of Lent, beginning next Sunday, Pastor Danny and I will be following Peter (and, of course, Jesus) to Easter. Today, we get a sneak peak of how Peter responds here. Peter, too, was transfigured when Moses and Elijah appeared and the clothes of Jesus became dazzling white—not in the same way as Jesus, but he was changed. Mark tells us that Peter and the other disciples were terrified. We also know that Peter says something pretty silly, or at least it seems silly. He says that he wants to build shelters for each of them. I have heard various commentators trying to make sense of this comment. They say that Peter was actually referring to the festival of booths, which involves building places of worship, or they suggest that Peter was expressing his desire never to go down from the mountain but to stay there. We don't know what Peter was thinking, but we see from the story that Jesus basically ignores what Peter is saying, because he is not making any sense.

Peter is having a mountaintop experience. He's gone up and seen something very few people have ever seen. He is terrified; he says the wrong thing. But, it's understandable. He doesn't understand what happened. He trudges down the mountain, wondering, *What was that about?* Jesus wisely tells the disciples not to talk about what they've seen. They don't understand what it was about. Not yet.

But the other shoe eventually drops. They do eventually find meaning in this story. Jesus' glowing figure was imprinted on their retinas; it was indelibly etched in their minds. They would see Jesus on the cross, and they would have the transfiguration in the background. They would see Jesus in the upper room, and they are trying to put that together with the scene on the mountain. And they would see the birth of the church, the death of Stephen, and in the background always is Jesus transfigured on the mountain with Moses and Elijah, the voice of God continually saying, "This is my beloved son, Listen to him!"

Going to the mountaintop with Jesus eventually bears fruit in Peter's life. The writings in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter are attributed to him and reflect the thoughts of this disciple. As you listen to these words written decades later, contrast it to Peter blurting words on the mountain when he didn't know what else to say. This is very different:

[W]e had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16b-18)

And then he writes this synopsis of that moment years before: "So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

There has been a metamorphosis here. From someone babbling about building dwelling places to someone who understands that there is a difference between seeing a light and having the morning star rising in your heart. What a deep and wise reflection that is on the spiritual life, on our spiritual journey. Peter has been changed. Transfigured. Metamorphosis has happened.

What about us? What about the story of our lives? I think it's important that at the beginning of Lent, as we start to move with Jesus toward his death, that we have this story of the transfiguration in our mind. It can shape us and change us. That's the other thing we can glean from this mysterious story. JESUS HAS THE POWER TO TRANSFIGURE US.

From having been around the block a few times, I know we can relate to Peter. We can be terrified to be transfigured, and many times having lived through the transfiguration, we see that we are better for the experience. Last week, I was given a rock. The rock has the word “faith” on it. I know these rocks were given out at a meeting that I missed while out of state visiting family, so I did not hear the explanation.

I decided, for the purposes of a sermon illustration, to make up my own explanation. Through a little research, I learned that this rock is BASALT: “a fine-grained, extrusive igneous rock formed from the rapid cooling of low-viscosity lava rich in magnesium and iron.”<sup>3</sup> It’s a gray rock. I also learned that this rock looks VERY different when it is polished.

On Amazon, you can buy a motorized rock tumbler for \$56.90. (I did not buy one; we’re trying to move more stuff out of our house than we bring in.) Rock tumblers are used to bring out the beauty of rocks and minerals. But before the tumbler is turned on, along with the rocks, an abrasive grit and water is added to the mix. First the grit is coarse, and it progressively gets finer. Woodworkers understand this as they smooth wood first with a coarse sandpaper and then finally end up with one so fine you can barely call it sandpaper. As the motorized barrel of the rock tumbler turns, the grit between the stones creates friction, which wears off the rough edges, smoothing out the rocks. Eventually, with the amount of time depending on the hardness of the rock, they are transformed into brightly polished stones.

Face it, we live in a pretty abrasive world. Although the rough and tumble of it all may seem chaotic to us, if we choose the churning can strengthen our relationship with Jesus. The book of James called these burnishers of the soul “trials of various kinds.” Paul referred to them as the “all things that work together for our good.” Every bit of grit they bring to the tumbler of life can help us in taking another step in becoming closer to Jesus!

Transfiguration moments are happening in your life when you pay attention. Some mystical experience, some startling moment of clarity. Maybe you’ve had a strange experience, something spiritual happened, and you aren’t even sure what it was. Maybe most of the time we are face down, terrified, with a close up view of the mud. There’s some light around here, but we don’t really know what it’s all about. This week, I invite you to keep the image of the transfiguration in your mind. Transfiguration—metamorphosis—is part of God’s plan for your life. Like Peter, the terrifying light at the moment of change can become the hope that the morning star will dawn in your hearts.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basalt>