

**Reading:** 2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

**Text:** Mark 9:5 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."

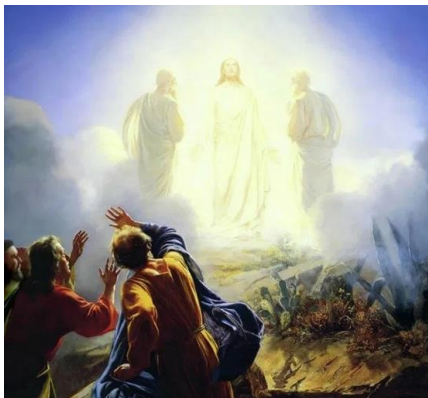
**Theme:** *Transfigured lives - living in the presence of God*



I come from the mountainous part of Samoa. To many Samoans, the place is not pretty because it is rugged and unforgiving. But these are the mountains where the god of ancient Samoa lived. And it is easy to see why they thought that way. If you can manage to scale the vertical and narrow cliffs and reach to top of the tallest peaks, the effort can be rewarded with some of the most awe-inspiring sceneries you can find anywhere in the world. The photo on the screen was taken, probably, at around a 100 meters or so above sea level.

From the highest points of the mountain range, you can find yourself being overcome by the majesty of the Creator, and you might just find yourself bursting into a spontaneous singing and worship of God, totally oblivious to the time or anyone and anything else.

That is the mountain-top experience, made famous by Martin Luther King Jr in his, '*I've been to the mountaintop*' sermon, on April 3 1968, suggesting that he had had an encounter with the Creator. As such, the phrase has become one of the many metaphors that we use for an encounter with God. It is highly likely that this was the reason why people in ancient times had their gods living on the top of mountains.



In the readings from Second Kings and Mark, we heard stories of encounters with God. In the gospel reading, Jesus is taking Peter, James and John up to a mountain. And while there, Jesus transfigures before the disciples. His clothes become dazzling white that it must have blinded the disciples. While this is happening, Elijah and Moses also appear and talk with Jesus.

This is the transfiguration of Jesus. He has become someone so different from the Jesus the disciples have known. At this moment, Jesus is saturated by the glory of God. He is still the son of Mary and Joseph, but he is now the anointed One of God, as well. That is, He is now God's Messiah or Christ; He is the Beloved Son (Mark 9:7).

Stunned at what they are seeing and with words departing his mouth, Peter stumbles over saying, "[Ah]...Rabbi, it is good for us to be here, [isn't it?]; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (v5)

In the reading from Second Kings, something similar is happening as God's power is, again, in display.



God is about to take Elijah up to heaven, and Elijah and his protégé, Elisha, have travelled to Jordan for the occasion.

As they walk and talk, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separate them, and Elijah ascends in a whirlwind into heaven. In a sense, Elijah has been transfigured; he has become someone that is very different from the Elijah that Elisha used to know.

This event must have rattled Elisha that he cries out, "Father, father!" (v12). He is not sure what to say.

Both these events join heaven and earth, and the disciples and Elisha are overwhelmed by the electrifying and glittering presence of God.

Peter is so stunned that does not want the experience to end; he wants to live up there. He says, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make some dwellings, ...." (v5)

But who can blame him? This, after all, is the yearning of human beings, is not it? To touch the gates of heaven; to transcend one's self and be in heaven with God. As the Psalmist testifies, '*Blessed are those who dwell in your house ...*' (Ps. 84:4).



The transfigured life or living in the presence of God is something that is truly extraordinary.

Former Uniting Church President, Dean Drayton, in a sermon he preached on my first year at UTC, searched his data of experiences, and the closest he could get was being on a sailing boat. The wind pushes the yacht while you sit and allow the wind to caress your face. But he admitted that such an experience, like the many things that we imagine about God, was way short of what Jesus and Elijah were going through, and what the three disciples and Elisha were experiencing.

Jesus' experience shows us what a transfigured life, or a life saturated by God's presence, looks like. It glows, and it is always positive! It is radiant, and it sees no darkness in people! It is full of life, and people feed off it! It fears no one and it is not afraid to speak the prophetic word, even if death is the consequence. As the Psalmist proclaims, '*Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame,*' (Ps. 34:5).

According to American, Messianic Jew Rabbi Kirt Schneider, the glow in the person whose life is transfigured is due to the Holy Spirit. He says the Holy Spirit is a source of power that is everywhere present; it is like electricity: it gives light, but it is also useless if it is not connected to an appliance that works, or to a light bulb that is alive.

This means, any life can be transfigured, for God, through the Spirit, fills the universe and beyond. But it is of no use, if we are not functional; God has no use for us, if we are broken.

What does it mean by that? It simply means the Spirit cannot enter into us, because our minds and hearts are closed; because we are too proud; because we think we have God all figured out; because we think our theology is the only right one; and because we think we can work out our own salvation.

To become functional Christians, we need to open up our minds and hearts and to humble ourselves. Once we have become functional, then we can try a number of things that can help us stay connected to God. There are many things that we can do, but here is an incomplete list:

#### Scriptures

We have two main sources of knowledge of God: nature and Scriptures. For us, the Bible has been our main source of knowledge of God. The Bible tells us about God, and what God desires of us. The main problem for us is that, the Bible is not like any other book. It is a mysterious book, because the original languages are mysterious and the stories are linked to geography, history, and culture that are unfamiliar to us. It is very easy to hear ourselves, rather than God, when we study the Bible. The solution without doing a degree in theology is to read different scholarly translations and read different commentaries. Avoid the Message and New Living Translation. Then want to simplify things, but in doing so lose quite a lot. It is hard work, but it is worth it.

#### Give to others, out of love

You can give without love, but you cannot love without giving. Love and compassion are feelings of the heart that need to be poured out in tangible ways. Paul says giving without love, even his whole being, is pointless (1 Cor. 13:2). And it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

#### Care for others out of love

According to James, this is the true religion of God (James 1:27). Many people have testified about the blessings that they receive from caring for others, especially those that are physically and mentally less able. Grace and I visited Steve Adams last Thursday to see how he was going after his surgery last Saturday. And he and Ruth shared with us about the deep satisfaction that their oldest son is receiving from teaching children with special needs. Renown, Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen, wrote profusely about the profound experience he received from caring for severely disabled people at the L'Arche Daybreak community, in Toronto, Canada.

#### Seeing the divine in others

One of the major struggles that we have in the Christian life is trying to see God in others, especially those who have harmed us. But Bible is unambiguous in its declaration that humans

are created in the image of God; *Imago Dei* (Gen 1:26-27). I know it is difficult to see how God can be in someone that you consider an enemy, but that is what the Bible is saying. In his long, but beautiful tribute to his dear mother, Connie Hunt, last Friday, Robert Hunt said, that his mother always saw beauty in everyone that she knew; and she was a very happy person.

### Bearing Christ's yoke

In Matthew 11 verse 29, Jesus says, '*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me*'. And how does his yoke look like? He says, 'I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matt. 11:29b). And you know what? That yoke is very heavy, because it is not macho to be gentle and humble. Like most things, Jesus, it goes against our human nature, or our human failure. But that's it. Keep your peace, do not judge others, and you will find God and rest.

### Music and art

I had coffee with Ockert Meyer at the Canberra Arboretum on the Thursday before my induction. One of the things that we talked about was worship and things like music, poetry, paintings, sculptures, icons, liturgical dance, flowers and other things that we do in worship and to our worship places. And he said that all these things are important, but they should act only as windows through which we can see God. When our gaze or our hearing stop at the object, then those things become idols. That means that when we listen to Faure's requiem, we should be able to feel what Faure said he was experiencing while composing the piece: he was at the gate of heaven, and Faure was not very religious. Robyn, I believe, no longer does the liturgical dance, but when she and Judith Griffith were performing it, I always saw the Spirit moving in the worship space.

### Meditating over nature

As I said above, nature is our other source of knowledge of God. When you study the structure of the atom, the snow flake, the hail, the rocks, and the so-called laws of physics, you should be able to see the mind of God in all of that. Indeed, that is what physicist Paul Davies says in his book called, *The Mind of God*. Paul is not a believer, but he believes in the divine nature of all things including mathematics. It is a belief that French palaeontologist and Jesuit Priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, shares in his book, *The phenomenon of man*. He says, everything has a spirit. Maybe it is hard work solving the maths or to peer into a telescope or microscope, but a walk in the bush or climbing Mt Kosciusko might do.

### Keep good companies

'Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night' (Ps 1:1-2). You all know this is true from your own life experiences.

### Prayer and meditation

This was Jesus' main way of staying connected to the Father. I have put together prayer and meditation to indicate the kind of prayer that works well. It is not our usual prayer with a shopping list. Indeed, we may not call it prayer, because this is more listening rather than talking. It is a moment with God where we listen to the sound of silence and the voice from the deep.

Fasting – wilderness

One of the things that the early Christians found popular was escaping into the wilderness and living life as a monk. It is what Jesus did after his baptism, where he spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. The purpose is to depend on God; to totally focus the mind and heart on God.

The season of Lent is an excellent time for that. So I am asking that we create a desert in our church, for the whole season of Lent. We will have no decoration, no candle, no material hanging from the cross. If you have a cactus plant or other plants of the desert, you can bring them. We start Lent with an Ash Wednesday service this coming Wednesday at 7.00 a.m. On Easter Sunday, bring a flower or a bundle, if you are able, to celebrate new life and perhaps something for the children to enjoy.

Lent is also a time of personal journeys with God and His Christ. We read the Bible, we meditate on it, and we try an experience a life without something that has occupied too much of our lives. It could be food, drinks, the telephone, the tv, or whatever. Food has been my nemesis, like most Samoans. So, I do away with a meal during Lent. Sundays, of course, are always days of feasting; they are not part of Lent; they the days of the Lord, and the Lord likes his food and his drinks (Matt. 11:19).

Now, there are other things that help connect us to God at certain times. For me, the alb, the stole, the cincture (robe) and the cross serve that purpose during worship services. But it almost did not happen had I not studied the theology of these things. You see, like some of you, I was a youth of the hippy culture. I never like dressing up, and I literally went through seven year of two undergraduate degrees with one pant. By the end of its productive life, it was full of patches. I was going to frame it, but it disappeared in mysterious circumstances. To this day, I still do not know whom of Grace and my mother threw it away; or probably burnt it! But I am now very comfortable with the church's tradition. You may not see the halo over my head, but believe me, I feel enveloped by the love and presence of God every time I put on these vestments for the worship service.

It is an unbelievable experience to be in the presence of God, to be transfigured or to be transcended.

Our lives, as Christian, should be transfigured lives, from time to time. And a transfigured life is living in the presence of the divine – living freely and unencumbered, living peacefully, living joyfully and living with hope and assurance that God is in our midst.

Stay functional, and stay connected to God during this coming season of Lent.

For the glory of God.

Amen