

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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*Transfiguration of the Lord*  
Luke 9:28-43

### **Mission Beyond the Mystery**

Something happened on that mountain long ago. Whatever it was, I can't explain it.

Something happened that gave the early followers of Jesus a deeper insight into who he was and what his mission was all about. Something happened that helped them see that he was chosen by God, and that all the law and the prophets who had gone before pointed to him. Something happened that in retrospect crystalized Jesus' mission for those struggling disciples.

And when they began to grasp his mission, they began to understand their own as well.

That is our challenge, too—to understand Christ so we can live the life he calls us to live. That is our quest, our reason for being together, our reason for church. We come here seeking understanding of Christ so we can live the life he calls us to live. Now that's a simple statement, but every word in it could spin off a discussion or a doctrine, a question or a sermon. *We come here seeking understanding of Christ so we can live the life he calls us to live.* We come, seeking the mission beyond the mystery.

Some find the mystery to be too mysterious. The modern mind seeks an explanation. "Tell me again what happened? Jesus began to glow when he was praying on the mountain? And then two men appeared out of nowhere? How did they know that it was Moses and Elijah? Was Moses carrying two stone slabs with writing on them? Was Elijah shivering because he gave his cloak to Elisha? Were these ghosts or a vision or what? And the disciples admit to being sleepy—were they dreaming, or hallucinating?"

Others revel in the mystery. This transfiguration story has been a favorite subject of paintings and iconography, the subject of Christian meditation and reflection for centuries. Oh, to have stood on that mountain with Peter, James and John, to have experienced such nearness to God's glory that one could see the radiance of Christ, and to know the confirmation of the scriptures as explicitly as if Moses and Elijah were there in person, and then to hear the stunning truth in a voice that is unmistakably God's. "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!" Religious experiences are real. This story describes something real that really happened. But words, I believe, cannot capture the mystery. And no matter how hard we try, we cannot capture the holy. Such extraordinary moments of divine revelation are gifts of grace, not human accomplishments.

Something happened on that mountain, and even if we can't explain it we can still seek the knowledge of Christ it reveals, his identity and his mission. For knowing those, we can know better who we are and who we can be together.

Now, something more mundane happened the day after the mountaintop experience. They came down off the mountain and met a great crowd. The Renaissance artist Raphael includes this gathering crowd in his painting of the Transfiguration which hangs in the Vatican. It is tall vertical painting, like a mountain, and the upper third shows Jesus, Moses and Elijah in the light-filled clouds. Their feet don't even touch the ground. Below them on the flat mountaintop, as low to the ground as they can be, are the

three awe-struck disciples, shielding their eyes from the brilliant light. But the lower half of the painting shows the crowd, more than a dozen figures centered around a man holding a child. The child reaches up and looks heavenward, and two men in the crowd, disciples of Jesus, point far above. It is a tangle of confusion and suffering, awaiting an answer from Jesus.

Something even more mundane happened to me this week. I took two boxes to the UPS Store, two boxes containing 25 hygiene kits for emergency relief in Haiti. The helpful young man who weighed and measured the packages noticed the address, Disaster Relief Center, and asked if there was something inside for people in Haiti. His eyes filled up as he recalled the daily news stories, a tangle of confusion and suffering if ever there was one, and he told me he wished he could do something. “Like John Travolta,” he said. “Did you know he flew his private jet there? But I’m not rich like John Travolta. I’m just a blue collar kid of guy, with problems of my own. I’d like to help, but I can’t do anything.” He finished up his job, putting labels on the boxes and shifting them to the next mailing platform.

“You just did help,” I told him. I think he heard me, and understood. And I thought of Mother Theresa’s words, that we’re not called to do great things, just small things with great love.

The mystery on the mountain, Luke tells us, was followed by a miracle in the valley, the healing of a child, hope for the needy. Once again, Jesus shows his followers what he means by “good news to the poor, release to the captives, the recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.” Once more he demonstrates that God’s loving favor is for here and now. But then he turns to the disciples who didn’t do the same while he was up on the mountain, and scolds them. Why did you think you needed to wait for me? Why did you think that what you could do wouldn’t be good enough? I have shared my power with you. God’s kingdom is here today.

Who is Jesus Christ? The identity of Christ which the disciples saw on the mountain top and in the valley and which the Gospel writers proclaim is that he is God’s Son, God’s chosen One, God’s ambassador of love and peace, God’s self-revelation to a confused and suffering world. He is the harbinger of God’s kingdom, the herald of God’s good news, the one whose mission it was and is to rescue us from ourselves and from the sin of the world. But it’s not enough to say “yes, I believe this about Jesus” and then to sit on our hands and call it worship. When we claim Jesus to be our Savior, we claim him as Lord, too. And when we claim him as Lord, we submit our skepticism and doubt, our fear and our desire to be self-directing to his direction, his claim on us, his call to live as he shows us NOW.

At the center of our life together is Jesus Christ, but our personal knowledge and love of him are not enough. At the center of our life together is Jesus Christ, but our private experiences of spiritual grace and truth are not enough. At the center of our life together is Jesus Christ, but monuments to his glory like Peter wanted to make on the mountain top are not enough. Our personal knowledge and love, our experience of his grace and truth, and the lovely monuments erected in his honor all over the world are not enough—what he wants is for us to be the bearers of his love, the channels of his grace, the instruments of his goodness in the world which he redeems. Our professions of faith, our memories of spirituality, and this lovely building are not enough to make us Christian. What Christ wants us to be and to do is what he wanted of his first disciples—to be those

who act now as he would act, those who demonstrate kingdom power and purpose, those who live out his mission in a broken and needy world. So when the world cries for help, we don't point to Jesus and wait—we act as he would act, and then we point to Jesus in thanksgiving and praise.

When we know his identity, we know ours. When we understand his mission, we understand ours.

Sometimes we confuse our mission with our missions, our purpose with our activities, and we lose sight of why we do what we do. Our mission is to live as Christ's people together. We manifest that in many ways, many activities together. And together we can manifest God's kingdom here and now. A few examples of how working together, each playing a part, we do what would be impossible for one person alone. First example: we host Family Promise not because we're humanitarians and we feel sorry for those less fortunate than ourselves, but because we believe God's desire is for all persons to have shelter and opportunities and Family Promise is a useful tool to fulfill that desire of God. Jesus would do it. We don't need to wait for him, for he's already given us the power. A second manifestation of Christ's mission - our ministry of hospitality. We welcome others into Christ's family of faith not because we need new members to keep up with the bills or we want to become a bigger social club like some other churches, but because Jesus demonstrated that God welcomes all and wants to be reconciled to all people. If we don't do that, he'll call us a faithless and perverse generation and ask us what we were waiting for! And a third way we live out the calling of Christ: we share the precious piece of God's good earth called Rockhaven Camp with those who are not part of our fellowship not because it might generate revenue or boost church membership, but because we have experienced God's nearness there, and we know the spiritual neediness of our neighbors. So we are following Jesus when we welcome children and create opportunities for people to experience Christian community at Rockhaven. We do this in faith, for Christ has commissioned us to his mission of sharing good news with the world, and he promises that we will have what we need to carry out his mission.

This week begins the season of the church year known as Lent, a time of self-examination and renewal in preparation for Easter. On Wednesday evening you are invited to come and "feed your soul" and "pause on the road to Jerusalem" by studying with others the scriptures which will be the focus for the six Sunday services in Lent. They are all stories of Jesus on the journey to his death and resurrection. Luke tells us he talked about that with Moses and Elijah on the mountain, his coming departure or exodus. So today's story prepares us for this journey, and the next six weeks prepare us for the journey to the cross and beyond. Our emphasis will be on how and what to practice to make us the Christ-followers we say we want to be.

For if we know who he is, we will know who we can be.

And if we know his mission, we will know our mission.

And knowing our identity and mission in Christ, we will be who God created us to be, who Christ redeems us to be, and who the Holy Spirit empowers us to be. Together, by faith.