



The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Last Sunday after the Epiphany – February 15, 2026

A Truer Story

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9



Jesu Transfigurato (Salvador Dalí, 1964)

[Matthew 17:1-9] *Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then 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.” While 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!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As 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.”*

them to the ground and fills them with fear.

All three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – tell the story of the

transfiguration. Each marks it as a

turning point. And each begins by

referring to something that happened a

week earlier. So that event must be

important. Six days earlier Jesus foretells

his death and resurrection and connects

that to what it means to be his disciple.

“Take up your cross and follow me.”

I imagine that as they follow Jesus up the

high mountain, Peter and James and John

start to consider what it means for them

to truly follow in the way of this rabbi. It

is sobering.

And then it all happens so fast: Jesus’ face

shines like the sun – just like Moses when

he encounters God on Mt. Sinai! He talks

with Moses and Elijah – like he is a

prophet of that order! A cloud rolls over

them and the divine voice calls Jesus

“Beloved” – he IS God’s son! It seems the

wind is knocked out of the three disciples

and they fall to the ground in fear.

I want to talk about their fear, but first I

want to explore transfiguration. When

Matthew writes, “Jesus was transfigured

before them,” he uses the Greek word

“*metemorphothe*,” from which

“metamorphosis” comes – meaning the

More than 30 years ago, Will and I took a

hike that I still remember vividly. It was

on a trail from Independence Pass,

Colorado, along the spine of the Rocky

Mountains, tracing part of the

Continental Divide. I’ve always been

fascinated by the Great Divide, that

north-south geographical line that

separates rivers that flow into different

oceans.

The dirt trail from Independence Pass

starts at 12,095 feet, well above the tree

line, and follows a rocky ridge with

stunning views of Mount Elbert and other

14,000 ft peaks. The wind was constant

that day and when we hiked the parts of

the trail with steep on one side, it

felt like standing on the wing of an

airplane. It was thrilling and frightening;

I remember at the highest part of the trail

dropping to my hands and knees to catch

my breath in the dizzying surroundings.

It remains a touchpoint for me of nature’s

fierce power and the awareness of my

own finitude.

When I hear the gospel story today of

Jesus’ transfiguration on the high

mountain, I remember that deep gulp of

air on the Great Divide – the thinness, the

fear, the awe. Of course, the altitude is

different – the Judean mountains are one

fourth the size of the Rockies. But what

James, John, and Peter experience knocks

complete transformation from one state of being to another. But the transfiguration is not Jesus becoming something new, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. It is revelation — something hidden made visible.

It seems there are two things happening here. The disciples have known Jesus in his full humanity, the trusted teacher and healer who travels, eats, and laughs with them. But now Jesus reveals the fullness of his divinity, his kinship to God, and God's power to draw wholeness and holiness from partial humanity. He shares his identity in an unexpected and profound way.

It is staggering, but how much of it is really new? Maybe Jesus has been shining all along, and the change is in the disciples. Their eyes are opened. Something shifts in them. Maybe this is a story of *their* transformation. Perhaps it is both.

And like all stories of scripture, it's not just about what happened thousands of years ago. I've been thinking this week about this dynamic of revelation and transformation. In those moments when we share our full identity with another, both are changed. A priest friend of mine told me that she experienced this when

her son came out as trans. When he shared the fullness of his identity with her, it wasn't really *new*; it's how God had known him all along. But now their relationship held a deeper truth.

One of the places I've experienced it is when I accompany people at the end of life. There is something about owning one's mortality that strips away the masks we wear and reveals the soul in its tender beauty and abiding strength. It is holy preparation for death, and it is also an essential orientation for a life well lived. And when we share that across generations, each is changed. As St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "All of us, with unveiled faces, see the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, [and] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."¹

When have you seen the essential self of another and been changed as a result?

But revelation is only half the story of the Transfiguration. The other half is fear. When the disciples hear the voice from the cloud, they fall to the ground, terrified. This is the day it gets real for Peter, James, and John. They understand who Jesus is, why he is resisted by religious and political leaders, and what

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18.

That all their hopes for the future will be crushed.

Is it true? They don't know; they can't see the future. They don't even understand the present.

So, Jesus helps them find a truer story. "Wake up; I am with you. Even though you don't understand this now, soon you will. No fear, no suffering, not even death is greater than God's power to heal and transform."

These days, the world does not feel transfigured into a mirror of God's grace. There is conflict and cruelty, division and exhaustion. Many of us feel the thin air of it — that dizzying sense that something fundamentally grounding is slipping.

The disciples felt that too. And still, Jesus touched them and said, "Get up. Do not be afraid." Not because the world is entirely safe. But because we are not alone.

Following Jesus means choosing a truer story — even now. A story in which fear does not have the last word. A story in which love is stronger than death.

So we rise. We follow.

Amen.

very likely lies ahead. The journey to the cross.

And they also know there is no turning back. True life is found in following Jesus, wherever it leads. And it can be scary.

So again, Jesus reminds them of who he is. He goes to them and touches them. The first words the disciples hear after the voice says, "Listen to him!" are ones of encouragement. "Get up and do not be afraid." Another translation is: "Wake up! There is no need to fear."

In his book "How to Not Be Afraid," Gareth Higgins explores the idea of fear as story. That behind fear is a story we tell ourselves about vulnerability, scarcity, inadequacy, or meaninglessness. Higgins suggests that when fear rises, we ask ourselves, "What is the story driving this? Is it true?"

And then we must find a truer story. A story that does not deny or downplay suffering or loss, but insists that God's transforming presence holds it within love.

Maybe the story behind the disciples' fear is that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, which means everything will change. They are afraid he will be killed, and they will be abandoned. That this time of miraculous community and healing will be cut short.