The Transfiguration
Luke 9:28-36
Transfiguration, Year C March 2, 2025
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome on this special day of the church calendar. Jesus' Transfiguration is celebrated in our Revised Common Lectionary on the Sunday immediately preceding Ash Wednesday. We will be exploring Luke's account of this mountaintop experience in chapter 9, but the story is so significant that you can also find it in Matthew (17:1-13) and Mark (9:2-8). Before we delve into the events, let's review what we have learned during this season after the Epiphany about who Jesus is and what he does.

Recall that on Epiphany Sunday we were invited to witness the coming of the Gentile Magi from Persia to worship the young child Jesus. These wise men were convinced by the heavenly star that he was an important person, and so they set out to find him. As they speak about Jesus to Herod, they refer to him as the "king of the Jews." Thus, by Matthew 2, an important facet of Jesus' identity has been called to our attention. The season after Epiphany continues to point us toward other markers of Jesus' identity. We have also learned from various Gospels that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah of David's line, and the son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter. He's also a prophet, a teacher, an exorcist, and a healer. Those who oppose him accuse him of being a blasphemer and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. In short, we've learned a lot about him over the past several weeks.

We'll discover much more today as we turn our attention to the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. "Transfiguration" refers to a change. In the Bible story, Jesus' appearance was changed so as to unveil his heavenly glory. Peter, James, and John witness this dramatic transformation that reveals Jesus' true identity while they are with him on a mountain top. These disciples were changed by seeing Jesus as he truly is. If we have our eyes, ears, and hearts wide open, we too can be changed. We will see Jesus more clearly.

Let's dive into the Transfiguration story as it appears in Luke 9:28-36. It is now eight days after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah (9:20). This passage opens with Jesus taking his three closest disciples with him up a mountain to pray. Although this mountain is unnamed here, we know from many Bible stories that mountains are places where heaven and earth

meet. Deeply spiritual experiences can—and do—occur in what are sometimes called “thin places.” You may have heard this Celtic phrase, which refers to a location where people feel a connection to the divine and a closeness to heaven. As we’ve previously seen, Jesus often goes up a mountain to pray, thus seeking out a thin place that holds sacred meaning for him. I’ve quoted this saying before, but I’ll say it again, because it captures an important point: Prayer is the world’s greatest wireless connection! God wants to be in a prayerful relationship not only with Jesus but also with us. We have to be in a space that allows such communication to occur, uninterrupted and hindered by the noise of the world.

No doubt about it! Jesus certainly was in such a sacred space! While he was praying, “the appearance of his face changed, and “his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning” (9:29). He must have been glowing! Seemingly out of nowhere, two of the Old Testament’s most revered figures emerged: Moses and Elijah. They too “appeared in glory” (9:31). And then the three glorified persons talked with one another. Notice that they are “speaking about [Jesus’] exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem” (9:31). What we overhear of this conversation sounds quite understandable. We know that at the end of chapter 9 (verse 51), Jesus is going to leave Galilee and make his final earthly journey. His destination is Jerusalem; specifically, the cross on Mount Golgotha.

But there’s much more here. Let’s pause for a moment and consider the meaning of the word, “exodus, ”or as some translations read, “departure.” In Greek, as in English, the word is *exodos*. Well, that sure looks familiar, and it opens up several linkages. I find it interesting that this event in Jesus’ life is interpreted in light of God’s salvation history with the Israelite people. Writing in *Connections* (Year C, Vol. 1, page 313), Professor Diane Chen explains:

> The Greek word *exodos* carries multiple meanings. First, it recalls the first exodus, when God sent Moses to deliver the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Second, *exodos* is a euphemism for death, anticipating the means by which the Messiah will save God’s people this time. Third, Jesus will indeed depart after the resurrection by way of his ascension into glory. In these three meanings taken together, Jesus’ “departure” (*exodos*) represents a salvific [saving] mission in which God’s Messiah will suffer and die before he is raised and vindicated in glory.

During Jesus’ conversation with Moses and Elijah, the disciples were apparently drowsy, but did manage to stay awake long enough to see Jesus in his glory, as well as Moses the giver of the law and Elijah the

prophet. These two giants of the faith were ready to leave the scene when Peter gets a bright idea. He wants to build three tents or dwellings, one for each of the glorified men. Some scholars believe that Peter is simply trying to extend the time that the disciples have with the three, but we don't know his exact motivation. And there is no time for any discussion on that, because as Peter is talking a cloud overshadows them and they hear the voice of God saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (9:35). These words sound familiar to our ears because they echo the words of the voice from the cloud that spoke at Jesus' baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (3:22).

Notice, though, that at the Transfiguration, God gives the disciples instructions. They are to listen to Jesus. The Greek word used here, *akouó* (think: acoustics) means more than just hearing with one's ears what is said. The listener is not only to be attentive to the words but must also actively and obediently respond. Such a relationship between listening and reacting is also seen in Jewish writings. If we trace this idea of listening to Jesus further, we can find a similar statement in the early Greek translation of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) known as the Septuagint. Deuteronomy 18:15 reads: "The Lord thy God shall raise up to thee a prophet of thy brethren, like me; him shall ye hear." The prophet referred to here is to be like Moses. Christians have traditionally understood this as a reference to Jesus. So as far back as the days of Moses, people have been primed to hear God's coming prophet, who we also know as God's Messiah and God's Son. In *Luke, Interpretation Series*, (page 134), scholar Fred Craddock points out:

> Jesus is not just another in a line of prophets; he is preeminent. He is to be heard, not over against Moses and the prophets, but as the proper interpreter and fulfillment of what has been preserved in Scripture.

So, we are to listen to the one who knows how to interpret the Scriptures of his Jewish faith through the lens of his Sonship and his Messiahship.

Apparently, all of this action took place in just a few moments. When God's stops speaking, Jesus and the three disciples are alone on the mountain. They walked down the slope in silence and told no one what had transpired. Jesus did not direct them to keep quiet, so perhaps the disciples were trying to process the amazing event they have just witnessed. Later, of course, when it's time for Jesus' "exodus," what happened on the mountain may make more sense to Peter, James, and John. But for now, the full meaning of his departure cannot be fathomed.

Wow! Today's passage plunges us into deep waters, doesn't it? Perhaps

these are the same deep waters that Peter and his colleagues fished in at Jesus' direction when they came up with such an abundant catch of fish (5:1-11)! My head is kind of spinning to think that mere mortals could experience such an earthshaking divine encounter as the Transfiguration. We know that some mystics have had inexplicable experiences with God. But most of us have to content ourselves with what I call "God-sightings." We can catch a glimpse of God here or there. What we encounter is enough to convince us that yes, God really is there. Sometimes those experiences extend further and we can perceive that God is present with us, laughing or weeping with us, cheering us on, or holding our hand when we are hurt or afraid.

As we read today's story, we find ourselves again in deep waters We've seen Jesus' true identity unmistakably revealed. Any doubts we may have had as to whether he was truly divine have been erased as we caught a glimpse of his face shining in glory. We are clear that this story is unrepeatable in our own lives. We can't stand on the mountain with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, but we can, as Rev. Diane Roth suggests, practice ways to experience God in our midst. Here are her ideas for becoming aware of the God-sightings that are all around us:

> Begin with prayer. It is as simple as the request of blind Bartimaeus, outside Jericho. What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asks him. "My teacher, let me see again," he replies. That's all. Just "My teacher, let me see again." And then, let Jesus teach us.
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> Go small. Go for the fleeting glimpses, for the whispers, not the shouts. If God is present (as we say) in water, bread, and wine, God is present in other small, and ordinary things. And people. The cardinal may only be in your front yard for a moment, not long enough to take a picture—and yet, yes, in the cardinal I recognize something. A tongue of flame, perhaps? A moment of glory. I love the beginning of Luke, chapter 3. While Luke sets the scene and the timing by telling us all about who was emperor of Rome, and who was governor, and who was ruler in Judea, he goes on to say that the word of the Lord came to "John, in the wilderness." Rather than in the seats of power, where everyone expected the action to be, the people saw God out in the wilderness, standing in the river Jordan.
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> Look not for individuals, but relationships. Pay attention to service, acts of mercy, small sacrifices, what we do for love. Imagine what "grace" would look like, if grace were a painting, or

a sculpture, or a movie...

Pay attention not just to success, but to failure. Pay attention to what is broken. Pay attention to the broken pieces, the shards, the tears, and the joys. Pay attention to what, and who, needs healing. Pay attention to what is bent over. I see God every week in a man from my congregation. He walks bent over. I know the reason why. I knew his wife, who had contracted polio as a young mother. She recovered, but later on contracted post-polio syndrome. Every week they came to church together, and he had to help her, to carry her. They also often went out to concerts and theatre. For many years he lifted her and carried her. Now he walks bent over. And I see God.

(https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2014-11/god-sightings)

So the questions now before us are 1) Where do you see God? 2) How will you respond as a disciple of Jesus? And 3) How will you put Rev. Roth's suggestions into action?

They four are ideas all very worthwhile, but I am drawn to the third one about looking for relationships. I have witnessed instances among our church family of people reaching out to serve others in Jesus' name. Admittedly, none of us is in a position to end world hunger, but I have, for example, seen you do what you could to offer food to those in need, both those you know and those who are strangers. Your actions were a God-sighting for me. I imagine the people you helped also saw the face of Jesus in you at that moment.

To avail ourselves of more opportunities, I have invited Shane Walker, who is now working with Overflow Café, to talk with each of our churches next Sunday about the work of the Café and his role in it. Shane recently spoke with the congregations at St. Paul's and Zion, so I have it on good report from Craig that this is an exciting ministry that is truly helping to spread the gracious love of Jesus in our community.

On Tuesdays at 11:30, for the next several weeks, I'm taking 6 folks as my guests to the Café to hear more from Shane, as well as Café manager, Dudley Parr. The Café can become for us a mission that we support with hands-on volunteer work, as well as with financial and prayer support. Everyone who wants to go will get a turn, but due to space limitations, you must reserve a seat. To spin off of our District motto: We can, we will, we must make a difference in as many lives as we can. Created in the image of God, we are all beloved children of our heavenly Father. We need to proclaim this news to all! Love, Nan