**The Cloud of Fear and the Light of Faith**

**Text: Luke 9:31**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Transfiguration Sunday**

**March 3, 2019**

I wonder if anything like this has ever happened to you: you’re driving down a street that you’ve driven down many times, but on this particular day you see a house that you’ve never noticed before. It’s as if someone moved it there in the middle of the night and you’re seeing it for the first time.

Or you’re here in church on a Sunday morning, just like so many other Sunday mornings, only this day you notice a detail in one of the stained glass windows. It’s been there for maybe a century, but you’ve just noticed it.

Or you’re reading a passage of scripture that you’ve read maybe 50 times, but this time a new insight jumps out at you. It brings such a fresh meaning to the story that it’s like you’ve never read the passage before.

There are all sorts of things that seem to be hiding in plain sight. And one of those things is right here in the story of the Transfiguration. I’ve preached on this story sometime in February or March for nearly 40 years. But this year, for the first time, I noticed something new: the Transfiguration is a story about death. Yes, it’s also about life: new life, transfigured life, transformed life. But right here, hiding in plain sight, in the middle of the story, is a chilling reminder of Jesus’ death.

The Transfiguration is one of those parallel passages that we referenced last week. It appears in three of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. It’s essentially the same story, but with some subtle differences. And it’s important to pay attention to those differences, because they tell us something about the particular message that each gospel writer is trying to tell us about Jesus.

All three versions have Jesus going up a mountain to pray. All three versions have Jesus taking with him three of his disciples: Peter, John and James. All three versions, of course, have Jesus being transfigured into something like a creature of light. And all three versions have Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. But only Luke has them talking about Jesus’ death. The two Old Testament prophets seem to have been transfigured into much the same appearance that Jesus has taken on. Our text – which is Luke 9:31 – says that Moses and Elijah, “appeared in glory.” But then the text goes on to say what they were talking about with Jesus: they “were speaking of his departure, which was about to be accomplished at Jerusalem.” That’s a reference to the Cross.

This is a story about death; Jesus’ death. It is prefaced earlier in chapter 9 by the first explicit reference to the crucifixion, a reference that Jesus repeats shortly after they come down from the mountain; and then, near the end of the chapter, we reach the dramatic moment when Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). In Luke’s gospel, the Transfiguration is surrounded and infused with references to Jesus’ death.

We’re told that the disciples were terrified up there on the mountain. And we think, “Well, yeah; we’d be terrified too if we witnessed these three guys suddenly transformed into creatures of light.” But you have to wonder if the thing that really terrified them was all of this talk about death.

The Transfiguration is a story about death. And, it’s a story about life: new life, transfigured life, resurrected life. I mean, you got two dead guys up there on the mountain talking to Jesus; at least, they were supposed to be dead. But here they are alive! And not just alive; they appear in glory. And so does Jesus. Makes me think about how they talk about death in the Salvation Army. When a member – or, as they say, a soldier – when a soldier in the Salvation Army dies, they say that she’s been “promoted to glory.” You see, glory is one of the words that the Bible uses to talk about death. What we call death is the doorway to the life in glory beyond this world. So Moses, Elijah and Jesus all appear in glory. Perhaps what we have here, in this passage where death is hiding in plain sight, is also a glimpse into the resurrected life where all of God’s children will be promoted to glory, and we will be clothed in what St. Paul calls “spiritual bodies,” “imperishable bodies,” “resurrected bodies” (see 1 Corinthians 15:35-58). Perhaps it is the glory of these resurrected bodies that was revealed to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. Which has led more than one scholar to suggest that the Transfiguration is actually one of Jesus’ resurrection appearances that has been written back into an earlier part of the gospel narrative.

So you have death and new life juxtaposed here on the Mount of Transfiguration, and in the middle of it all the disciples are terrified. Then they get caught-up in a cloud and they can’t see a thing and a disembodied voice tells them to listen to Jesus, and that sure didn’t do anything to calm their nerves.

The disciples are terrified. And what do you do when you’re terrified? Well, sometimes you panic, and then you say or do things that just make the problem worse. The disciples are confronted by death, but they are shown as well the glory that lies beyond death, and Peter says, “Hey, let’s just stay here a while and watch the show.” Never mind listening to Jesus, never mind following Jesus, never mind moving forward through death to the glorious light that lies beyond; let’s just sit here a while.

When we stand in the presence of death, we stand as well in the presence of the One who is alive forevermore. But the eyes of our hearts and minds have to be open to that reality.

A friend of our congregation discovered this on a September day in 2001. Jim Buher was in charge of a group of employees from Crane. They were taking a course that he was teaching at IU, and he’d brought them down to Washington D.C. to get a different perspective on some of the things that they were working on back home in Indiana. They were at the Pentagon, on 9-11, when the plane hit. In fact, there were just two floors above and one module over from the area that the plane took out. They didn’t know what happened, of course; all they knew was that the building shook, the lights went out, and the place started to fill with smoke. They didn’t know the building. No one had a clue which way to go. As the smoke thickened and the darkness deepened, Jim figured that this was it. It looked like they were all about to die. At that moment, a profound peace came over him. It happens to folks when you realize that death has arrived and there’s nothing that you can do about it: you let go of all semblance of control, and you experience peace. A deep peace like you’ve never experienced before.

In that moment of profound peace, standing in the smoke filled, pitch black corridor of the Pentagon, Jim and his crew heard a voice. And the voice shouted, “There’s a light at the end of the tunnel. Just walk toward the light.” They grabbed hands and started to walk in the direction of the voice. Pretty soon they could see the light at the end of the hallway. All around them there was smoke and heat; tremendous heat. What they didn’t know was that, at that precise moment, they were walking above the burning plane. It had taken out the first 3 floors below them, and the corridor they were walking through had become a bridge over the site of death and destruction. Once they had crossed the bridge and reached the light, the voice directed them to a stairwell that led downstairs and out an open door.

A few minutes later, the bridge collapsed into the holocaust. Engineers who later studied the evidence can’t account for why those top two floors didn’t collapse when the plane hit. And when Jim later met the man who had guided them toward the light, the man said, “I can’t tell you why I went up to the 5th floor. After the plane hit, my co-workers and I should’ve run out of the building. We don’t have a clue why we were up there just when you needed someone to guide you to safety.”

Maybe Jesus knows. Maybe those men listened to Jesus’ still, small voice so that Jim and his crew could listen to the man’s very loud and commanding voice.

When we stand in the presence of death, we stand as well in the presence, and the power, of the One who is alive forevermore. The disciples were confronted with death up there on the Mount of Transfiguration, but they were confronted as well with life; they were confronted with the light that transcends death and opens the way to new life, transformed life, resurrected life. And while they were initially caught-up in a cloud of fear, the way ahead was revealed by the light of faith. Not unlike the experience of Jim and his co-workers at the Pentagon. And I’m inclined to think that by the time the disciples were headed with Jesus back down the mountain, they – like Jim – experienced as well that sense of profound peace.

That’s what happens when you lean into death and let go of control: you experience peace. The Bible calls it “the peace that passeth understanding” (Philippians 4:7) And sometimes it’s only when we’ve let go of our fear and we’re bathed in that peace that we’re able to see the light, and experience the hope, and walk in the direction of eternal life.

In the face of the Transfiguration, the disciples were terrified. And in their fear, they found themselves caught-up in a cloud, where they perhaps couldn’t see a thing. Fear will do that to us. It clouds especially the eyes of our hearts and minds and prevents us from seeing the light that is, in fact, all around us.

And the irony is that, in order to see the light, in order to walk toward the light, in order to be enveloped by the light and the new life that it radiates…you have to lean into death. “Those who lose their life for my sake will save it,” Jesus says shortly before they head-up the mountain (Luke 9:24). Or, as the Superstar version of Jesus puts it, “To conquer death, you only have to die.” In order to experience new life, you have to lean into death.

Death is hiding in plain sight in the story of the Transfiguration. And death is hiding in plain sight, right here. It is stalking the corridors of this building. We can smell it, we can taste it, we can feel it. Or maybe it’s not death itself but the fear of death that we sense in this place. Now don’t get me wrong, there’s a lot of life in this place as well. You can sense it during Tuesday morning Bible study, and Wednesday evening choir practice – both children and adult choirs – and Thursday afternoon Holy Moly. There’s a lot of life in this place, but there’s also a fear of death. And in the face of that fear, we want to grab hold of all that is known and familiar and find a little bit of comfort. That’s what you do when you’re afraid. It’s a very human thing to do; a very normal thing to do. And if Jim and his students had simply grabbed hold of each other and comforted each other and stayed there amidst the smoke and the darkness of the Pentagon and waited for death to come, who could blame them? When you’re terrified, you grab hold of something and seek comfort. And when you do that in the face of death, you probably are going to die. And sometimes that’s okay. But the irony is that when you let go of your fear and lean into death, when you no longer fear death but rather accept and even embrace it, you might discover new life. When you surrender control and start to listen to Jesus, you might be guided toward the light. You see, when we lean into death, we know that we have nothing left to lose. And in the peace of that moment, we can dare to do the unthinkable: like walk into the heat, walk over the fire, walk toward the light.