

Preached by Beth Knight
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Grasping God

I remember one of the first times I attended church at Westminster. I was having a hard time adjusting to my first year in college, and I felt stressed and overwhelmed by my new life. I sat in a pew and went through the motions of worship, but my mind was still focused inwardly on my own problems. I almost left the service to go cry in the bathroom, but I choked back the tears and stayed. As I adjusted to my new life and started to find my niche, I was able to let go of my anxieties. Today I'm standing here before you transformed by the experiences of the past four years, and wanting to cry rather because I have to leave. Now don't worry, this isn't going to turn into some sappy graduation-like speech, at least I hope not. When Laura Sugg (Presbyterian Campus Minister and Associate Pastor) told me that I could preach on the Transfiguration, I was intrigued, but that could be because I didn't really know what the Transfiguration was. Laura was kind enough to make it clear that I didn't *have* to preach on these passages, I could choose anything I wanted. The lectionary passages are indeed obscure, and a bit dense, but I nevertheless felt moved by them. There was a lot of anxiety and uncertainty for Peter when he confronted the impossible, and the former student Elisha had to endure a painful separation from his master. There was a lot of fear they had to deal with before letting go.

Now let me take a step back for a second. I was going through some old pictures over winter break and found some from a family vacation to Colorado some years ago. We were up in the mountains, and my parents suggested I go skiing. I had been a few times before with my church, but I wasn't very good. It was Colorado, everyone there must be a serious skier, and I was just a novice. And the mountain was so big. Sure, there were bunny slopes; but the mountains were still there, looming over me. They were daunting, but also spectacular. My parents suggested I take lessons, but that seemed like such a commitment and I already had it in my mind that I wouldn't go. So I didn't ski. I was too afraid. I was in Breckinridge Colorado, and I didn't ski. When I related this story to my parents recently and admitted how silly it was to miss such a great opportunity, my mom simply said, "Yeah, you were quite a pill."

Peter had to deal with fear on a mountain too. Mountains are often holy places in the Bible, but when the disciples accompanied Jesus, they were probably not expecting a miracle. They were simply traveling with their teacher. Then, all of a sudden, Jesus bursts into light. Here, a man of flesh and blood becomes transfigured; transfigured, meaning to change in outward appearance, particularly to glorify or exalt. This is Jesus, appearing in all of his glory, demonstrating to the disciples, and the

readers, that he is the Son of God. Elijah and Moses appear as well, lending justification from the past. But Peter, good old well-meaning Peter, has an odd reaction. In his terror, he suggests building dwellings for Jesus and the prophets. What does he mean? Build dwellings? Is that really all you can come up with, Peter?

To be honest, I find Peter's reaction to be understandable. This is his attempt to define and contain Jesus. I personally can't blame him. I struggle with a similar problem. The Transfiguration, the affirmation of the glory of Jesus and his triumphant sacrifice is not something that is easy to grapple with. How would you react if a man you knew and loved suddenly, before your eyes, became a dazzling bright light? The reality of Jesus, his love, and his passion are practically incomprehensible to us.

Because of this, I will confess that sometimes it's difficult for me to connect the church and my faith. Now this is in no way a criticism of Westminster or Bush Hill, my hometown church. Of course, I've grown up in two wonderful churches that have meant the world to me. I wouldn't be up here talking to you if these communities hadn't shaped me in a dramatic and positive way. But when it comes to feeling close to God, I can't usually say that I *feel* closer to God because I go to church a lot. I usually feel closest to God when praying and reflecting on my own. No matter how involved I am, I can't shake the feeling that my personal faith and my church life are separate. How can something so glorious, so awesome, fit into a building, into a ritual? Now, don't get me wrong, I also believe that corporate ceremony can be a grounding way to worship; I believe that in community we grow closer to Christ, and I believe that Jesus clearly wanted us to engage with each other in church. I just can't always bridge the gap between personal and public devotion. I want to, but it's sometimes hard to deal with the mystery when you're surrounded with people, and you feel like you should have it a little more figured out.

Something in the passage from Mark reminds me of the poet Keat's theory of negative capability, an idea that helps me grapple with the complexities of religion. This theory is often explored in literature and philosophy; Keats defines it in a letter as "when man [or woman] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." As a Christian, and an English major, I love this idea. For me, it seems to be the way to go about faith. The salvation that Jesus offers us, the eternal promise of God's love, these ideas are too big to fathom, too mysterious to try to define. To truly grasp the mystery of God, we must suspend whatever doubts and difficulties we have with our faith, not try to banish or deny them. We must embrace the uncertainty and simply allow our minds to be open. Like Peter, it's easy to become scared of the true meaning of Jesus, it's easy to become frustrated by trying to hold onto something so elusive, but just know that you don't have to! You don't have to have the perfect definition of your faith and God. God defies definition!

Amidst the mystery of the Transfiguration, Peter does reach out to try and define what he cannot explain, to hold onto something that he cannot fathom. He tries to

grasp onto this impossible reality of a transfigured Savior and the presence of historic prophets in the only way he can. But he just doesn't get it. While I believe that worship communities are a way to know God, you can't *just* box Jesus into church. You can't contain him in any tangible way. Church, and even community, are not the sole contexts in which to know our Savior. He is a blazing light, reaffirmed by the prophets of the past, a promise for the future.

As Jesus is transfigured, a cloud suddenly overshadows the light. God speaks from the cloud, proclaiming "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" These words allude back to the baptism of Jesus, which Pastor Jim preached about several weeks ago. This time, instead of simply blessing and approving Jesus, God suddenly demands our attention. These words are not veiled or obscure, this message is about as straightforward as you can get—listen to him! The blazing glory of our transfigured Savior is overshadowed by a cloud, allowing our eyes to adjust to something concrete. Despite the confusion of the glorious Transfiguration, God's ultimate message is clear, it is something we can see and understand—this is in fact, my Son, and you should listen and obey him.

The Transfiguration of Jesus may be difficult to understand, but the final words in this story affirm that we need to listen, even if we can't always completely grasp the meaning of God's love. Jesus undergoes this Transfiguration to prove the reality of his divinity, and ultimately sets us free. The reality of Christ means that we are saved; we are free to release our fears and anxieties in this world. Jesus is the Son of God. He died for our sins, and so our salvation is guaranteed. God is ever present in our lives—what then is there to worry about? The mountain can be a terrifying place, but you can't let anxiety dominate your life. I cowered before a mountain, and while the consequences of that event weren't very dramatic, giving in to fear is no way to live.

Of course it's not that easy. When my courage fails me, I can take comfort in Elisha's story from 2nd Kings. This is also a story about miracles, about God's amazing power on earth. There are whirlwinds and chariots of fire, but these are not the focus of the story. The story is instead centered on the very real relationship between the prophets. Elijah was a larger-than-life figure endowed with the living spirit of God; young Elisha could have hesitated at the expectations, at the pressures of being his successor. But Elisha knew the glory and mystery of God; he didn't struggle with defining it, he instead embraced it by asking for a double share of the spirit. Elisha did love his master, and the story doesn't deny the pain of separation, of letting go. The student sticks by his teacher until the end, repeating three times "as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." His love and loyalty for his master are inspiring. In the end, though, he is able to let go and embrace God's call. He is stricken by grief, but in the last lines of this passage, young Elisha parts the water, as Elijah had done, and walks into his shoes. He is sure of God's power in his life, and he goes forth confidently.

It's hard for us to be as secure as Elisha, but we can grow stronger in our faith. I am no longer the girl who won't ski because she's afraid. When I was a first year, I sort of half-heartedly kept a journal. At some point during that transitional year, I wrote down my three biggest fears – first, that I would regret not making the most of my college experience; second, that I would never fall in love; and third, that I would never find a career I enjoy. I was looking through this old journal recently, and when I came across this list, I smiled. I took out a pen and crossed out the first two. I have absolutely loved my time at the University, and I'm about to celebrate my two year anniversary with a wonderful guy. As for the third, well, the future is scary, but God has always taken care of me. I may never find that perfect career path, and the road ahead will be hard, but I know that my life belongs to God, that my Savior has died for my sins, and so I can let go.

So what must we do to release our need for certainty? How can we let go? Elisha endured the heart-wrenching loss of his master. The disciples of Jesus underwent doubt, anxiety, fear, and the loss of their beloved teacher as well. These stories of Transfiguration are painful, but ultimately hopeful. Elisha and Peter each try to hold on to something, but they are both doomed to fail, whether they admit it or not. It's not easy to let go of our fears and uncertainties, but when we do, we become something greater. Elisha inherited double share of the spirit and became the next prophet, living out God's will in our world. Jesus proved that he was the Messiah, he died for our sins, and the result is our eternal salvation.

We cannot always grasp the glory of the Lord; we cannot always hold onto it, but we must let go and trust in God. The final word in each of these biblical passages is a commission. The Transfiguration of Jesus proves his divinity, and with this recognition comes the responsibility to listen to God's word and live out the reality of Jesus Christ. No matter how scary or confusing life or faith may seem, we can rejoice in the mystery and let go, trusting God with the rest. Amen.