

In the grand scheme of Jesus' life and ministry, the Transfiguration story isn't one that we always consider to be a "greatest hit". And yet, we remember and worship Jesus with this story every single year, as the last Sunday before Lent begins.

The journey from Transfiguration to Ash Wednesday, to Lent beginning, is a journey from the mountaintop to the valley, the very dust of the earth of which we were made. The mountaintop throughout the scriptures is thought of as the place where many prophets and people were closest to God, being so high up near the heavens. Even Jesus, at the beginning of this story, initially goes to the mountaintop to pray, to speak with God and be near to him. Would that make the valleys, the dust of the earth, the place we are furthest from God? I would argue not.

In Psalm 23 we are comforted knowing that God is with us even in the valleys of the shadow of death, comforting us with God's shepherding ways, with his rod and his staff, guiding us towards the still waters and green pastures of life. In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, we hear of an entire valley of dry bones, and with God's Holy Spirit new life and breath is brought into these bones, bringing animation and life and hope from a valley that seemed certain to be a place of death.

And so in our journey of Lent, beginning with the ashes and reminders that we are dust, and we will return to that dust, we find ourselves close to God too. God is with us in the highest mountaintop experiences, and God is with us in the valleys of the shadow of death, blessing the dust that forms us and all of this creation. God calls that dust good. And though the journey between mountaintops and valleys and everywhere in between is the inevitable journey of a life, God is with us, blessing us, making us new, in every step of that journey.

Transfiguration, then, is a reminder that there are good mountaintop experiences to be had, before we begin this journey to dust. But even those mountaintop experiences can be more complicated than we often give them credit for. The disciples in the midst of Jesus' transfiguration were terrified as they entered the cloud on the top of the mountain! Even our own

mountaintop experiences are filtered through the romanticization that comes with hindsight. When we think back to memories of things that were good and joyful for us, sometimes we forget the pain that the joy came after, the long nights or lack of sleep, the waiting and wishing and hoping and longing, the very human emotions that often get glossed over to tell a more acceptable glossy story.

But that does not take away their goodness. It means that there is more to the goodness that makes it all the sweeter. The mountaintop moment for the disciples had the sweetness of knowing exactly who Jesus was, but with the dramatic, physical sensations of transformation and terror and desire to make dwellings for the prophets they see. What this moment of Transfiguration does is affirm who Jesus is, uniquely different from these prophets of old, but connected to them in the great story of God's relationship with humanity. And that unique difference of who Jesus is, the beloved, chosen Son of God, gives us hope. It means that Jesus will die in the not so distant future from this Transfiguration event, but from Jesus' resurrection that comes after his painful torment and death, we have new life. We have the gift of everlasting life, the promises of God that nothing we do will ever, ever separate us from God's great love and grace and mercy. The goodness of God for the people of God. Jesus' death for the sake of our sins, and Jesus' resurrection for the sake of our everlasting life. Jesus' transformation from death to life for our own life, deeply connected to God, our creator, redeemer, sustainer, and hope.

We hear the voice of God as revealed to the disciples in this story, a unique moment that does not happen outside of Jesus' baptism or given as testimony from the prophets. The voice of God in Jesus' baptism says, "this is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The voice of God in Jesus' transfiguration says, "this is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!". In both situations we hear confirmation of Jesus as God's son, and a unique connection between the Beloved and the Chosen. Love is sometimes described as never giving up on who or what you love. Another way of saying this, love is the one who you continue to choose. We know God's love for humanity became flesh in the person of Christ Jesus, God's

beloved Son. Now hearing that Jesus is God's Chosen - this means the relationship is still strong and still going - it's the decision or action that comes with love. So are the actions of being pleased and listening to the one we love. Hearing that Jesus is God's Beloved who He is well pleased with is a reflection of God's actions of love towards Jesus. In the Transfiguration, we are given direction for actions on how to reflect our love for Jesus. Listen to him.

Anyone in a healthy relationship can tell you of the vital importance of listening to our beloved person. And so God gives that direction to the disciples directly, and by their witness, us too. The disciples were ordinary people who Jesus chose to be the ones to minister with him, according to God's will and desire. So much of ministering to others is centered on listening to them, their stories, their pain, their prayers, and reassuring them that God's presence and unending love is with them. And so we are ministered to by God, through Jesus, by having him listen to us in prayer, in worship, in the ways we call upon him in our day to day journeys, from the dust and the valleys as well as the mountaintops. The disciples get clear direction from God that the way to be ministered to by Jesus, God's Chosen and Beloved Son, is to listen to him. Even in the midst of their fear, listen to Christ. And by listening to Jesus, their own lives and faith were transformed, inside and out.

And so I pray, as we embark on our Lenten journey, that our ears, our hearts, our minds, our spirits, will be open to listening to Christ Jesus. Open to hearing the Spirit's calling for our life and for our world and that we will have that inner resolve to follow that calling. We are inspired by the witness of the disciples and the stories of Jesus' ministry in the scriptures, and I hope that you will find Jesus ministering with you, listening in your dusty valley times as well as your mountaintop times. And whether you find yourself currently in the valley of dust or death or on top of a bright and vivid mountain, know that Jesus is right there with you, and God, because of his great love for you, dear human, is listening to you in prayer and worship and all the ways you call upon God. May you have the strength to

listen in return, and allow God to guide you in this Lenten season of reflection and deep faith. Thanks be to God, Amen.