

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“THE ROAD TO GLORY ALWAYS PASSES THROUGH  
PAIN AND SHAME”  
March 6, 2011  
Matthew 17:1-9  
ALL SERVICES**

The vision given to Peter, James, and John was a preview of the coming glory of the risen Christ. The transfiguration revealed Jesus in heavenly glory. The disciples had no idea, however, what it would cost Jesus to reach such heights. The way to glory always passes through pain and trouble.

It is common human experience to catch glimpses of what is beyond us, whether physically, intellectually, or spiritually. Such moments leave some people forever dissatisfied with the mundane and the ordinary. But they leave other people with a new zest for life. What they have seen casts the present world in an entirely new light.

Sometimes a glimmer of light has been enough to keep hope alive, and even to inspire new insights and fresh courage. At some point all of us need a sign from beyond our present horizons; a glimpse of what is beyond us.

Emily Dickinson expressed her assurance of heaven, despite having never seen it. **“I never saw a moor, / I never saw the sea; / Yet know I how the heather looks, / And what a wave must be. / I never spoke with God, / Nor visited in heaven; / Yet certain am I of the spot / As if the chart were given.”** Are there people who have been granted visions of heaven? Who were they? What did they see? Is it possible that we all, at one time or another, are given glimpses of the beyond?

Faith, throughout the Bible, involves at least some things that cannot be seen. Faith, then, is partially defined as trusting where we cannot see. This begins with the foremost of the patriarchs, Abraham. God said to him, **“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”**

Granted, God promised to make of him a great nation, to make his name great, and to protect him, but Abraham was leaving everything he had ever known and going to an unknown location. And he was seventy-five years old! It is no wonder that Abraham became the enduring example of faith and was called *“the father of the faithful.”*

There are other examples of faith in the unseen through the Bible. In 2 Timothy, for example, Timothy is encouraged to rely on the power of God and on Jesus Christ, *“who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”* Timothy was being encouraged to have faith, not just in the testimonies of other believers, but in the glorious future made known in Jesus Christ.

These are two examples of the biblical emphasis on faith that has an unfinished and future dimension to it. God, who is our Creator and Redeemer, prepares a transcendent future for the faithful that eyes have not seen, nor ears heard. Today we share this perspective. Despite the goodness of all that has been revealed, we, too, await a full and final manifestation of God’s glory.

The transfiguration is confusing and even disturbing to many modern readers of the New Testament. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain where the most amazing thing takes place. Some biblical scholars say it was Mt. Hermon. Jesus is transformed into an otherworldly reality, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white. Then long-dead Moses and Elijah appear with him. A voice from heaven says, *“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”* Then it ended, and Jesus and the disciples came down the mountain.

What seems obvious is that Moses and Elijah personify the two major streams of Old Testament tradition: the Law and the Prophets. Jesus being the central figure is clearly intended to show, first, Jesus’ relation to Moses and Elijah, and, second, his superiority to them. The transfiguration was for a moment only, but it revealed what was ultimately true about Jesus and about the biblical history now fulfilled in him.

Some commentators have suggested this was a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus that was placed back in the story as a sign of what was to come. This view, however, has little to support it, whereas, as a revelation of Jesus’ fulfillment of all prior biblical revelation, it is both timely and understandable. Jesus has just blessed Peter’s confession of faith as the foundation of his coming church, and has

just told the disciples of his approaching death. What Peter, James, and John may have understood of the meaning of this phenomenon at that particular point is irrelevant. Whatever else it meant for the three disciples, the transfiguration was a glimpse of the beyond. It was more than they could bear, however. The experience was overwhelming. And when God spoke, they went face down on the ground in fear.

Glimpses of glory probably come to all of us, whether we see them for what they are or not. Sometimes people are hesitant to talk about their deep experiences, for fear of what someone might think. A glimpse is probably about all any of us can bear. Sometimes it is not God's reluctance to reveal more to us, but our failure to see more deeply into the things we take for granted.

Martin Marty tells of a woman who said her favorite New Testament story was the one about the disciples on the road to Emmaus. She said: **“Every time this is read, I find myself smiling. Our lives may be filled with trials and leave us feeling broken and even hopeless. Along comes Jesus (only we don't recognize him) to refocus our attention on the truth of his message - - one of forgiveness and hope. We're drawn to him through his words until finally he reveals himself to us.”**

In this world it is not ultimately important that we see heaven, the beyond, or other transcendent realities. Jesus would tell us that in this life what matters is whether we see each other, and those who are most in need of love, of shelter, of food, of hope. Jesus actually said that when we have helped the least and the neediest of our neighbors we have served him. Jesus might say that we are most likely to see heaven in the face of a little child, or a grateful mother, or a forgotten senior. The nineteenth-century philosopher Henri Frederic Amiel wrote: **“Life is short and we have not much time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love! Make haste to be kind!”**

Many people's daily work takes place almost entirely within arm's length. Over a long period of time their distance vision may lose some of its sharpness. This is true of our mental and spiritual vision as well. We can become so familiar with, and focused on, the details of our work that we lose sight of its larger significance. The church needs to keep its eye on the future. Much of our daily work seems mundane and insignificant, but an occasional glimpse of eternity can put it in perspective.

Abraham left home and started toward a future he knew little about. He did this, not as a youth, but when he was 75 years old. He went solely on the promises

of God, leaving all he knew and not knowing what he would encounter. He trusted God for what he did not know and could not see. Yes, the way to glory always passes through pain and trouble. But if you are willing to take that journey, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.