

“Glitter and Ashes”
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2
Luke 9.28-36
February 27, 2022

The Sunday before Ash Wednesday is always Transfiguration Sunday. It is always this lovely Gospel story in which Jesus takes people up the mountain. The author of the passage helps reveal who Jesus is, talking about the identity of Christ as related to Moses and Elijah, giving him history and background. This is also meant to show a transformative and revelatory experience of Peter and James and John. Not only was Jesus physically changed in appearance, but the three disciples changed in experiencing this event. It also gives directive for how we respond to meaningful spiritual events.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain with no expectations, no description of what is to come. Suddenly two people appear, talking to Jesus. Eventually the disciples identify these others as Moses and Elijah - these saints that have died but are now somehow communicating to Jesus.

Peter is a helper, a doer, and a problem solver. He often wants to solve the problems that do not exist - or that he perceives exist. He is eager to serve Jesus, but perhaps oblivious to his real calling at times, as I imagine we are from time to time.

They all have what we now deem a mountain top experience. Sometimes this happens with mission trips or vacations. We travel to a place and have a wonderful, life changing event! We take that information back home, but too often when we return to the mundane, everyday life, we forget that experience. Our memory is wiped clean by the tasks that demand our immediate attention. So, sometimes we want to stay on that mountain top - because it's better than our experience in the valley. Metaphorically the mountain brings us closer to God because it is an experience we can sense God, and so we don't want to let that go because when we return to the valley, the real world, we feel farther away again.

I believe Christianity in America often feels this way - maybe institutions in general. I've heard churches talk about how they remember pews packed in the 1950s and how the churches were filled. This weekend I had the joy of hearing Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's new president, Rev. Dr. Asa Lee, speak about the decline of churches. He said that for too long we haven't been honest about the state of the church. We've pretended for too long that the church was "ok" and would swing back, and so when we talk about the way things were, there is this fear - this crisis of identity. We have identity crises throughout our lives - during our teenage years, during college years, and well into adulthood as our purpose and meaning in life change and we bump up against the identities of others and the flaws of the world. I think our world hit a huge identity crisis in pandemic, and we had to face our values in many different ways. How we engage with one another and ourselves during that identity crisis is important - do we grow and learn and make progress, or do we withdraw?

Peter has anxiety in this experience. It is as if he fears going back to the valley, going back to face the identity he knew before recognizing Christ as the Messiah, as the One connected to Moses and Elijah. He's nervous and so he decides to stay on the mountain. "I'll build us tents!" He offers. He wants to dwell there - to stay in the comfort. We often want to do this, too. It is easier to stay comfortable and not have to leave the mountain. It feels comfortable to look back at a full church and wish to go back there. It feels comfortable to cling to what we know and understand.

But, imagine this. What if they never went up that mountain? I imagine that they were comfortable in the valley before going up the mountain with Jesus. I imagine that they thought life was pretty ok and didn't have any idea they were going to be transformed on the mountain, so they could have built a dwelling place in the valley and never gone up, never been transformed. They never would have had that fuller picture of Jesus. They went to the top of the mountain, unsure why they even went. Maybe afterwards they still weren't clear, but if we dwell in one place, we won't experience what comes next.

Many people have asked me about the history of becoming a Matthew 25 church. People are unsure how it was decided, though happy it has happened. I need to confess to you that I have no idea. It feels like we stumbled into it. When I arrived there was information about it in the Ministry Information Form and some other documents. I assumed you all had had many conversations about it, but I've seen that isn't true. Perhaps we traveled up this mountain together, not knowing what would be at the top - but I'm glad we did. Sometimes we don't know why we go up that mountain but we are filled with love and gratitude and feel compelled to take that experience back down to the valley.

I nearly didn't use the Corinthians passage. I find Paul's writings to be a bit anti-Semitic and unnecessarily harsh to those who do not believe Christ to be Messiah. If you know anything about Paul, you might know he was a Jew named Saul before he had a conversion experience, in which he became Christian. I do believe he brought his own baggage into this conversation, and that we have to learn how to be Christian without putting down our siblings of other faiths. Paul's use of the veil is also troubling, making wearing a veil perhaps a negative connotation.¹ Muslim women wear veils as part of respect for God. Moses hid his face when God passed because no one could see God and live. There are logical reasons for veils and hiding one's face.

Perhaps I wonder if he is getting at the point of masking - not physical masking against disease, but masking that often happens when we are pretending to be or feel something else for social convenience. Sometimes it might be appropriate to mask. When I am in public waiting in an especially long line and a child begins to scream because they are exhausted from waiting, I often point out that the child is merely vocalizing what everyone else is feeling. Adults learn to mask that emotion of distress as we grow older. At times masking goes too far and we try to please people rather than find constructive ways to express ourselves.

¹ Calista S. Isabelle, "2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2" in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 450.

There are plenty of barriers that keep us from telling those mountain top experiences. There are barriers that keeps us from expressing God's deep love. They are often barriers that we set up. How do we tear down barriers that keep us separated? Perhaps we start by sitting in ashes together, remembering that we are all human.

Lent is a time when we examine our identity to God, our relationship with God, and sometimes it is uncomfortable. On Ash Wednesday we remember that we are mortal and will die, and return to dust. This past weekend at a Presbyterian College Chaplains Association meeting, I was talking with some chaplains about an app that came out probably five or six years ago that was meant to help people seize the moment and be more present. The way it does this is by reminding you of your mortality. Each day the app sends a notification reminding you that you will return to dust – like a perpetual Ash Wednesday. I was talking about this app the day that Russia invaded Ukraine, and another chaplain rightly asked, “Do we really need to be reminded of our mortality right now?”

In pandemic, as we watch conflict across the world, we are reminded of our mortality. On Wednesday we will spread ashes on our forehead and remember again that we are mortal, reminding us of our reliance on God. Yet, we don't stop there. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. It is the beginning of a hope. A few years ago I heard about an Episcopal organization that was encouraging people to put glitter in the ashes. The rigid Presbyterian in me pushed back, because according to Calvin we're depraved and we need to sit in those ashes and remember how much we rely on God. But I kept reading about the purpose of the glitter. The Episcopalians were putting glitter in their ashes to be in solidarity with the LGBTQIA+ community. It is a visible way of saying some communities have been oppressed in the Christian sphere, and have sat in ashes, and we have hope for a better future. The Episcopalian group, Parity, writes: “By becoming visible, we show our faith in God who empowers us and wants us to repent of hurting each other. We want people to see how important our faith is to us.”² I won't be putting glitter in our ashes, but I do think it is worth considering who are we sitting in solidarity with as we receive our ashes? Who is in a perpetual Ash Wednesday that we can sit with and listen?

I'm talking about ashes a bit prematurely. Today is supposed to be a celebratory day in which we remember the dazzling transformation of Jesus on the mountain. I also think it is a heavy day in which we look toward Ash Wednesday and prepare for this forty day season. It is the mix of ashes and glitter – celebration and sorrow. Each Wednesday and Sunday through Lent we will examine different symbols of Lent. This Wednesday I'll talk a bit more about ashes, as well as the symbol of lament – a torn tunic.

Today we see the glittering, dazzling gown of Christ, but by Wednesday we will be sitting in ashes with ripped burlap. This is our faith. This is our world. This is what it means to be human – finding our faith and each other through the ups and downs of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² <https://parity.nyc/order-glitter-ash-2021>