



Sunday February 27, 2022
Luke 9:28-36, (37-43a) (The Transfiguration)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

What's the biggest life change you've ever experienced? Because all of us go through life changes. It's inevitable. Some changes come and go without much notice at all, and sometimes, these changes completely and unexpectedly alter the course of our entire life.

I'd guess that most of us have experienced such a change and wondered – what just happened. And now you're faced with the overwhelming reality of – what am I supposed to do now?

Maybe the change was something you desperately wanted or needed, or maybe it was something you never would've dared to wish for. Maybe you welcomed the change and experienced it as positive, or maybe the change was so gut wrenchingly painful that it left you with a seemingly unfillable void. Whether we see it as good or bad, wanted or unwanted, change always comes with consequences, challenges, and lots of questions.

Now I have no doubt that each of you has a collection of stories about the changes you've experienced, the changes happening in your life right now, or the changes you hope for or that you fear will come to pass. So, all this makes me wonder how we choose to live amid these changes, and most importantly, what is it, or who it is that we grab a hold of when it seems the world around us and within us is changing?

I'm curious if the disciples in today's gospel were asking these same kinds of questions, and if they too felt the winds of change blowing through their lives. Because, immediately before Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain he tells them and the others that he must suffer, die, and be resurrected. And he will tell them this again after they come down from the mountain.

What happened on that mountain top took place between Jesus's two announcements of impending change. Maybe that event, what we call the transfiguration, was about preparing and helping the disciples to live through the change that was to come. And maybe the transfiguration story has something to teach us about how to live in the midst of change as well. Maybe that's why every year the transfiguration is the gospel that we hear on the last Sunday after the Epiphany – the Sunday before we enter into the season of Lent, a season that focuses on change. Change, whether it takes place on the mountain top of life or in the valley of the shadow of death is a reality for all of us.

The longer I'm alive the more I've become painfully aware of how many voices call out for our attention – both outside and within. There are the voices of critics about what's happening and what should be done – voices of judgment, of second guessing, and certainly of fear. There are voices of self-doubt, self-criticism, and all the should haves, would haves, and could haves. And then there are the voices that tell us to run and hide, and others that tell us to fight and resist. Voices that ask questions and want explanations. While other voices deny what's happening, blame, or tell us our world is crashing down around us.

There are so many voices that cry out for our attention, but not every voice is helpful or even worth listening to. Some voices may sound sweet, but they're not good for us. The story of the transfiguration says that there's only one voice to listen to. And it is God who speaks from the bright cloud overshadowing Peter, James, and, John saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

What if in the midst of change we sought to hear and listen to that One voice – the voice of Jesus? What if we kept our ears open to listen only for what Jesus was saying in our life and in our world today? What would our lives and the lives of others be like if we let ourselves become aware of and attentive to what Jesus is saying and doing – to let his concerns and desires become our concerns and desires, to let his way of engaging life and the world become our way of engaging life and the world?

Well, I think it would mean that whatever change comes upon us, it wouldn't have the final word over us. Jesus is always speaking a word larger and more powerful than all the other voices, but too often it's drowned out by those other voices pulling us in numerous directions. But only Jesus speaks a word of life, of hope, forgiveness, grace, mercy, generosity, courage, love, and healing. Jesus speaks this beautiful word to you and me and all God's children – the question is – are we listening to his word – and to his voice?

At some point in our lives, each one of us has or will face a change that causes us to stumble and fall, a change that will paralyze us and leave us feeling overwhelmed. But what's important isn't whether we perceive the change as good or bad, it's about regaining our balance and getting our feet back under us. It's about stepping into a new life when we aren't sure what that looks like or if there really is a new life awaiting us.



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The Transfiguration story appears in each of the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke but Matthew in particular offers us an important gift that we miss from Luke. Matthew tells us that when the three disciples hear the voice of God speak, they “fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.” And here is where Matthew’s account of the disciples’ encounter with Jesus gets interesting. Jesus begins by reaching out and touching them, letting them know this isn’t a dream or a nightmare, but rather that Jesus is most certainly there with them. Jesus follows this touch by saying, “Get up.” Except, it’s more than just “get up”, it’s “be raised.” Interestingly, this is the same word used by the angel, to describe Jesus’ resurrection.

So, listen to the latter part of the story again: the voice from heaven affirms Jesus’ identity as the Chosen One of God and commands Peter, James, and John to listen to him – that is, hear his words, follow his commands, be obedient to his call. In response, they fall to the ground in terror. And then Jesus reaches out and tells them, literally, to be raised and no longer fear.

This intentionality should be a reassurance for us that Jesus comes to us in whatever circumstances of change we find ourselves, touches us, and says, “Get up, be raised” It’s the promise that although life has changed, it has not ended. Somehow new life is hidden within change, even when we can’t see it, or we struggle to believe it. I’m confident that God never wastes an opportunity to be present in the changing circumstances of our lives and our world to bring us from the death of our old life into the new and abundant life he promises.

I think it’s safe to assume most of us live with some level of fear at the possibility of change – the fear of leaving what’s familiar, the fear of losing what we love and value, the fear of losing our power or our control – and sometimes it’s the fear that comes with getting exactly what we want. But here, amid the uncertainty of change, Jesus’ actions embody the very nature of God. Matthew tells us that Jesus doesn’t leave them on the mountaintop consumed by their fear. No, Jesus reaches out and touches the disciples, commands them to be raised, and then Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.” These are powerful words and Jesus speaks them directly to the heart of the human condition, and they’re just the words the disciples and us need to hear in order to be raised up and get back on our feet. What Jesus does is speak a word of resurrection that casts out fear, creates unexpected possibilities, and gives new life.

But I also want to be clear about something – Jesus’ words won’t magically eliminate our fear. Instead, we receive the invitation to take that first step into a new and changed life despite our fear. His words are the assurance that change doesn’t have the final word, Jesus does. We aren’t called to be fearless – rather, we’re called just to be courageous enough to trust that the Holy Spirit is with us – guiding us and reassuring us of God’s presence in the middle of the change and fear.

My friends, I won’t pretend to know or understand all the changes you’re dealing with. Maybe it’s in your relationship with someone you love, or a struggle you’re having with your children. Maybe it’s the death of a loved one. Maybe it concerns your own health – your age, your physical, mental, or emotional well-being. Maybe it concerns your job or your income. Maybe it’s a dream or plans that didn’t work out. Or maybe life is going exactly the way you want. Maybe you’re on a road to recovery. Maybe everything has fallen into place and for the first time in a long time you feel completely alive.

Listen to him. Be raised up. Do not be afraid. What if these words are holy wisdom meant to speak directly into these times of change? What if they’re the means by which we step into our own transfiguration? I wonder if maybe it wasn’t Jesus who changed on that mountaintop, but rather it was Peter, James, and John who were changed. Maybe their eyes were opened and their seeing changed, so that everywhere they looked they only saw Jesus, and maybe for the first time they saw Jesus for who he was and as he had always been.

And if that’s true, then it means every change – whether good or bad, wanted or unwanted, joyful or mournful – is illuminated with God’s presence – living and active and able to raise the dead to life and capable of equipping us with all the courage we need to lead us through every opportunity and challenge that we’re sure to face. Thanks be to God. Amen.