

# EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE

## Jesus, Global Crisis, and a Revolution of Hope

### *A Sense of the Sacred*

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
February 21-22, 2009 • Last Sunday after Epiphany (Transfiguration)  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

#### **Mark 9:2-9**

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

***"Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John,  
and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.  
And he was transfigured before them..."***

Mark 9:2

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It happened on a mountain. Okay, it was just a big hill – an Ohio Mountain so to speak! High on Vesper Hill, overlooking Seneca Lake in the valley below, at the Seneca Lake Baptist Assembly, near Cambridge, Ohio, I made my decision to pursue ministry as my life vocation. I was only fifteen years old at the time, getting ready to go into 10<sup>th</sup> grade but that call to vocational ministry...and that decision to say "yes" to God's call...was as real as anything I have ever known.

Actually, I think I had sensed a call to ministry when I was eleven years old, but I didn't know how to name it then and no one took me seriously anyway. I guess I was too young, but I remember the situation vividly to this day. Our church's beloved music director had resigned and I felt "called" to take her place. I boldly went up the chairman of the deacons, Earl Luke, and told him I wanted to apply for the position. He looked at me with a big patronizing smile on his face and patted me on the back and said that was nice "sonny." And that was that. But I was serious. There was something stirring in me for vocational ministry in the Church even at a young age.

A few years later my family changed churches and we were part of a new church start called the Brookside Baptist Church in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. It was at that time that I experienced my "mountain top" experience. When I shared with my pastor, Rev. John Brashear, the experience I had on the mountain, he took me seriously and mentored me under his nurturing wings. He saw something in a fifteen-year-old teenage boy that no one else saw, a preacher, a minister, a leader in the Church. And later, at age 16, I was licensed to the ministry – sort of a pre-ordination step in Southern Baptist churches – an affirmation by a church that they too discerned evidence of a call to ministry.

Soon after that I became the church's part-time music director, when a lay person in that church named Bob Dotson, to everyone's surprise, including mine, made a motion in a church business meeting that I be paid for my work as the "minister" of music. The church said "yes," and I was paid \$75 a week, which ended up being my part-time job all through high school. I planned the worship services, directed the adult and youth choirs

and three children's choirs. It was an exciting time of growth and experience for me. It's part of my Southern Baptist heritage that I will always treasure. (Don't let anyone ever say that I only talk negatively about Southern Baptists!) Truly, my experience in that church was a gift to me. And that gift spurred me on to become those things that Pastor John and the Brookside congregation could see in me. That pastor and that congregation believed in me what I could only hope might be in me, what indeed I became. They saw a butterfly where most folks – including myself – only saw a worm, a caterpillar gobbling up every leaf in sight. Isn't it funny what a simple gift can do?

I am not a fatalist. I believe we have many choices in life and many moments of crisis when at least two, often more, roads diverge before us. But I also believe God plants something within us – gifts, talents, proclivities, propensities, tendencies, passions – which unfold into our destiny. And some people – and some communities of faith – are particularly gifted at seeing what's inside people they may not even know about themselves and calling it forth into reality.

I like to think of the transfiguration account as a story about vision and destiny, about the disciples finally seeing something in Jesus that was there all along. In fact, some scholars think this story might be a misplaced resurrection account, moved back before the crucifixion as a way of saying the Jesus of history was the glorious Christ of faith all along.

The scripture is a little vague about exactly what happened on that mountain. Six days (Luke says it was eight days, but who's counting?) after Peter confessed Jesus was the Christ and Jesus told them that meant death and resurrection for him, Jesus took Peter, James and John to a mountaintop away from the others (Luke adds that it was so they could pray). And there on the mountaintop "*Jesus was transfigured before them*" (Mark 9:2). The Greek word is *metamorphothe*. Jesus was *metamorphosized* before them, the worm became a butterfly, "*and clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.*" Matthew adds that Jesus' "*face shone like the sun.*"

But think for a second, does that mean to say Jesus actually changed or that Peter, James and John's vision of Jesus changed? You'll have to decide. For sure, the story uses highly symbolic language. For instance, Moses and Elijah appear, no doubt symbolic of the two major divisions of Hebrew scripture at the time, the Torah and the Nabiim, the law and the prophets. How could they know it was Moses and Elijah anyway? Jesus introduces them I suppose. "Moses, Peter. Peter, Elijah. Elijah, John. John, Moses. Moses, James." And so on, like the meeting of team captains before the coin toss at a bowl game. What a scene, presenting the fundamental continuity of our Christian faith from its Hebrew roots, a narrative way to say that the God of Jesus is the God of Israel; that what God did in Jesus was a continuation, a fulfillment of all the promises God made to Israel.

Peter speaks up, as we expect Peter to do, gushing and fawning: "*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three [skenes], one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*" (Mark 9:5). The *skenes* Peter wants to build, variously translated as "tents, dwellings, booths, tabernacles," describes the lean-to's the people would make out in the fields during the harvest of the grapes and olives in the fall. This ancient harvest celebration became the occasion for the Jews to remember the days when they lived in tents during the exodus and concluded with the offering of first fruits to God. It was variously called "The Feast of Ingathering" or "Booths" or "Tabernacles." And it was great party. Jewish pilgrims came from all over the world to enjoy the fresh olive oil and the Beaujolais Nouveau and rejoice in God's goodness to Israel. All of this is just more symbolism pointing us beyond the story, telling us Jesus is the true fulfillment of the exodus. John uses the same Greek word when he says, "The Word became flesh and *eskenosen* (tabernacled) among us" (John 1:14).

Peter wanted to have a party right there on the mountaintop, which for some reason it seems, was inappropriate at the moment. Mark, along with the gospel writer Luke, both apologizes for Peter, explaining he didn't know what to say because he was scared. I wouldn't have known what to say either, and usually the best choice in the presence of Mystery is silence, but like Peter, that's hard for me as well.

Then suddenly, a bright cloud comes out of nowhere. Remember when God led Israel through the wilderness during the Exodus: "A cloud by day and pillar of fire by night..." Well, this is THAT cloud. It's more symbolism.

And a Voice interrupts Peter's blathering: *"This is my Son, the Beloved"* We remember that voice and those words from Jesus' baptism, the Voice that encourages Jesus from the beginning as a grace rather than as a reward after the fact. In Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, only Jesus hears the voice from heaven. But here, on the mountain, the disciples hear the voice and this time the Voice goes on to offer a little advice to Peter, James and John – especially to Peter I think: *"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* (Mark 9:8) Listen to him! Which, translated, is "Shut up and pay attention, Peter!" because maybe if we would shut up, be still, look and listen a little more often, we would see who Jesus is and who we are and who people around us are in God's eyes; we would hear and understand what this good news of the Kingdom of God is all about.

I am pretty sure that the story of the transfiguration, in all its strangeness, wants to tell us something about Jesus' unique nature as one who was infused with a sense of the sacred. But I think it is also saying more. I think is also saying something about Jesus' common humanity with us, that all of us are more than what we appear to be, that each of us also bears a sense of the sacred. God has planted within each of us the capacity to be glorious – gifts, talents, proclivities, propensities, tendencies, passions – which may unfold into our destiny before God. And part of our task is to see that in each other and call it forth; to claim it within ourselves and fulfill it. Thomas Merton, that wonderful monk from Kentucky said

*Life is this simple.  
We are living in a world  
that is absolutely transparent,  
and God is shining through it all the time.  
This is not just a fable or a nice story.  
It is true.  
If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves,  
we see it sometimes,  
and maybe we see it frequently.  
God shows [God's]self everywhere,  
in everything –  
in people and in things and in nature and in events.  
It becomes very obvious  
that God is everywhere and in everything  
and we cannot be without God.  
It's impossible.  
The only thing is that we don't see it.*

Too much we withhold our praise and thanks from one another, fail even to notice the people around us for the gifts they are to our lives. And we sell ourselves short, make excuses, fail to believe we can do better. A thousand inner voices tell us, "You can't, you won't, don't even try, you don't have what it takes..." But God believes in you even when you can't believe in yourself and sees what no one, not even you, can see. *"You are my child, my beloved..."* This is our identity as baptized followers of Jesus. I hope these words...*"you are my child, my beloved"* ...are the confidence that our newly baptized little sister Olivia Ann Roland grows into. And God only knows what she...what you...what we... might become if we will listen to THAT Voice, accept THAT encouragement, and offer THAT gift to others.

With that in mind, perhaps Brian McLaren is on to something. I think this may have been what Brian McLaren has had in mind throughout his entire book *Everything Must Change*. I have got a sense that he has been calling for our own transfiguration experience with Jesus. He writes that perhaps

We can begin to envision what it would mean for us to confront the suicide machine of our world in the way of Jesus, to expose it and deconstruct it, to intercept its trajectory and turn it to a better way, to reclaim its potential for ends more in line with their original creation. Perhaps we can see ourselves in a new light too, not armed with an ideology but infused with a new imagination,

[I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT THIS SOUNDS LIKE TRANSGURATION LANGUAGE TO ME]

part of a peaceful insurgency seeking to expel a suicidal occupying regime, gardeners working with God to tend the holy ecosystem so it continues to unfold anew day after new day, members of a secret

insurgency of hope, a global movement unleashing coordinated, well-planned acts of unterror and healing, producers of a new economy of love...

Doing so will require one radical, irreplaceable thing in us: *faith* – faith that the old narrative of domination is suicidal, and that a new story (good news) of liberation and reconciliation is available if we will only rethink everything and believe it. (*Everything Must Change*, pages 272-273)

I think a sense of the sacred was present in Jesus all along, but it took the community of faith, the scripture, the presence of God, the blessing of God, Moses and Elijah, yes, and even Peter, James and John to bring it out. And we can do that too! We can do that for one another. We can “behold” each other. I mean, really see who the person is standing there before us. We can encourage each other. We can give courage to the people around us to find that sense of the sacred that lies within them. With God’s help and a community of witnesses to take us to the mountaintop, we can be morphed into our shining destiny as the beloved children of God.

In another concluding section of his book *Everything Must Change*, Brian McLaren says he pictured Jesus:

wandering through the villages of Galilee, walking among his own oppressed and dominated people... who..had lost their hope. Their hopelessness left them paralyzed and powerless between two primary schemes of despair – the violent despair of terrorist resistance or the resigned despair of capitulation and collaboration with their powerful oppressors. He didn’t fix all their problems, even though many of them wanted him to and hated him when he didn’t. He didn’t organize an army or hatch a plot or design liberal democracy or create a new get-rich-quick business plan. He didn’t scapegoat anybody – if anything, he kept letting scapegoats off the hook, taking their side to the consternation of their hyperreligious critics. Instead, he simply let the people know he liked them – and so did God, that he was interested in them, that they didn’t have to be ashamed of who they were. He came close to them in their illnesses, wept with them at the graves of their loved ones, ate at their tables, drank their wine, listened to their words, let himself be injured by their pain – and, although it isn’t recorded in any of the gospels (canonical or otherwise), I imagine he laughed at some of their jokes too.

And he did one other thing: he told the people something, something outrageous, something so familiar to us, so familiar to me that it is only in rare moments that I get a glimpse of how wild it really was.

AGAIN, THIS IS SOUNDING LIKE TRANSFIGURATION TO ME.

It wasn’t an if/then statement – *if you do this and this and this and this, then you’ll get that result*. That would have been more pressure, another chance to fail. No, all he did was tell them that something was already true: the kingdom of God is here. Already. Here in its full flower, no, but here in reality, yes. Whether you believe it or not, whether you notice it or not, whether you like it or not. And all that he invited them to do was to believe it. And somehow, some of them did.

(*Everything Must Change*, pages 280-281)

And here’s my hope today: that somehow, some of us still believe it too!