

*Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Oh, I just got a little carried away with using up Alleluias before they go away on Ash Wednesday!

Many of you know that I am a singer. I consider singing as one of my gifts from God and I am so very grateful for that gift.

I'm going to take you back to 1987 for one of my mountaintop experiences. I was chosen to be one of the soloists at Luther College's annual performance of Handel's *Messiah*. Picture hundreds of singers in the choir behind you, a full orchestra, and the esteemed Weston Noble with the baton. At the appointed time, I walked the three steps up to the dais trying diligently not to trip on my full length, red velvet gown; squared my shoulders, planted my feet and opened my score to wait for the signal to begin singing, "*I know that my Redeemer liveth*" into the cavernous gymnasium, awash in bright lights so that I couldn't even see beyond my book in the black chasm of people. Singing simply became prayer. And I knew I was part of a long legacy of people who participated in the *Messiah* at Luther for decades before.

And such a mountaintop experience only happens because you spend a whole lot more time off the mountain—in practice rooms and countless rehearsals, learning and memorizing music, understanding the mechanics of your voice and how it works (and when it doesn't!) Singing a four minute aria can only happen after hours, weeks, months and years of practice—and that is not on top of the mountain, it is down in the trenches. And those are not “less than” moments, they are gifts of being present and accountable.

Imagine that every time we gather for worship, we are the disciples on the mountain seeing Jesus, the rabbi—the carpenter from Nazareth who became our teacher—bathed in light.

At first, it seems, Jesus and Peter, James, and John might just be out for a hike. A high mountain: the sort of place eager friends might yearn to scale for the vista. Then everything changes.

The vision the disciples behold removes the veil of Jesus' humanness to reveal his divinity: wondrous, frightening, powerful, unexpected, and rich, connecting all ages (the prophets Elijah and Moses with Jesus), giving enlightenment. His external appearance is utterly changed.

Jesus' transfiguration is not to be approached with the assumption that we can understand it. It means to draw us in toward what is

abnormal, unnatural—like Moses seeing the burning fire that does not consume the bush and like the fire Elijah hoped for and received from God on the altar drenched in water to win the wager against the prophets of Baal. The Transfiguration places Jesus in the lineage and honor of the two prophets who stand beside him on the mountain.

The disciples are terrified. Yet, they seek for a way to remain in the presence of what terrifies them.

And then the cloud appears as another manifestation of the divine with the voice that reminds us of the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism in Mark 1:11. Here, however, the voice does not speak in second person to Jesus ("You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased") but in the third person to the disciples ("This is my Son . . . listen to him"). The Transfiguration gives the disciples the experience of witnessing a most amazing and unspeakable vision that draws them to want to stay there, dwell in that place of wonder, and then to be told by the voice of the divine that their job is not to abide in that wonder but to go back down the mountain. The voice in the cloud is directed at the disciples, to the church, rather than to the Son as it was at his baptism. It speaks to Jesus' identity so that the church can see what Jesus alone heard when he was baptized.

In worship, week after week, through the Word of God and at the Table, our vision is restored. We are enabled by God to see Jesus as savior (something more than a teacher of morality and ethics) because the dazzling clothes constitute an epiphany. His transfiguration transforms the disciples in the story and transforms us by removing the veil over our vision.

The Transfiguration stands between the Time after Pentecost, when we are learning to be church, and Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday, when we are thrust back into the hard truth that we are dust. The power of the Transfiguration is that it plants in our hearts and minds the brilliance of eternity on the mountain with the greatest prophets, emboldening us for the journey together as the body of Christ. The Transfiguration thus prepares us to come to terms with our humility and our utter dependence on God.

It is no small matter that this Gospel lesson ends with the word “dead.” Jesus has embraced his identity as one who will die and be raised. He signals the journey ahead that will be coming when he and his disciples have left the mountain. It is one thing to have had a “high” experience, “a mountaintop” experience with Jesus up in the clouds where everything is brilliant, but it is not the be-all-and-end-all. The reason for the identification of Jesus with Moses and Elijah is for the church, the disciples, to realize their crucial work in the

world: to accompany Jesus to the cross, to take up our crosses, to die in order to live, to be last in order to be first, to refuse the invitation to turn away from God's laws.

The church has a responsibility: to listen to God's Son. That listening does not result in staying aloof where the air is pure and the view is stunning. The church must listen to the voice of God's Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross. We are not called to have power over others but to rise up as dust that has been formed by the breath of God and give life to others, especially those who are neglected by the powerful.

So, yes, relish in the momentary mountaintop experiences, but don't just build a temple and stay there. God gave you that moment to be filled with love, with justice, with reconciliation, with hope—and God gave you the gifts and tools to go back down that mountain and proclaim the Good News to a world in desperate need of it.

Alleluia. Amen.