

It's Uncontainable!

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Texts: Mark 9: 2-9

Before we dig into this strange and dazzling story of Jesus's so-called transfiguration, please allow me to speak from the heart for a bit about the news I've recently shared with all of you!

First, heartfelt thanks to all of you who have written me this week with often deeply moving acknowledgments. And, heartfelt apologies to those to whom I haven't responded yet. Since Monday evening, there has been a steady stream of emails, texts and calls. Literally, all of them have been beautifully gracious and understanding and I can't thank you enough for that! Honestly, I wasn't sure what to anticipate by way of reaction. I've never left a 20-year ministry. Colleagues warned me to expect all kinds of feelings to come up, in me and within the congregation, too. To be sure, there's still time to feel all the feelings. As one who has been sitting with this decision for some time now, I myself have been all over the map emotionally – in valleys of deep grief about needing to say goodbye to you, mountains of gratitude for the blessing and privilege this role has been, all of that taken together with feelings of fear and uncertainty yet also an emerging and now abiding sense of trust that now is the time for a shift.

I've been especially grateful to my therapist these past many months who has heard a lot of my internal process! In case it's a surprise to a few of you, yes, I absolutely have and need a therapist given all that goes on here (head) and here (heart) and even here (gut). I recently spewed out to him what felt like a full technicolor yawn of emotions, trying desperately to figure out how to hold all the highs and lows, how to frame and describe the disorientation, upheaval, and jumble of it all. I told him about the voices in my head arguing with each other. On one side, "this is a big deal, man, a *huge* transition, what are you doing?" On the other, it's "get over yourself already, it's a midlife shift, plenty of people, plenty of you have gone through this." And both are true! Last week, my therapist and I came to a natural pause in our conversation. We took a few breaths. He then said this. "Sometimes these moments cannot hold all that they contain." Let me say that again. "Sometimes these moments cannot hold all that they contain!" I wonder how that lands for you, given all that you and we and our world have been holding lately! For me it was a simple yet brilliant invitation to acknowledge that it's ok to be overflowing with grief, thankfulness, and whatever else is in the outpouring mix! It's ok! They are *uncontainable*! They are overwhelming, which is from the word *whelmen* which literally means to turn upside down! These moments are meant to hold it all, and neither are we. And with that, let's turn to our text.

Here in Mark Chapter 9, Jesus and his disciples have just climbed a mountain! One might say Jesus has been on an upward trajectory since Chapter 1, since he first began his public ministry of teaching and healing and exorcising demons! As one scholar has noted: Chapter 9 is "almost the exact midpoint of Mark's Gospel, as well as its highest geographical elevation(...likely Mount Hermon, the highest peak in Syro-Palestine). In broad strokes, the first eight chapters of Mark describe Jesus' ascent, his ministry of healing and liberation, and the last eight chapters describe the descent into his passion and death,

arriving finally at the stunning news of his empty tomb. The Transfiguration stands as the fulcrum, a high point and pivot point between these two great sections of Jesus' journey."¹

So, what happens here? According to Mark, Jesus lights up! His radiance somehow beams on and out in dazzling array and shows forth the glory of God! Apparently, he has arrived at the level of Moses and Elijah who miraculously appear by his side. Imagine a beautiful conversation among equals here, a parley of prophets. I can't help but share here that just a few weeks ago Nancy, my 22-year-old daughter Nellie, and I made a quick trip to Arizona for a belated holiday visit to Nancy's dad. One morning while Nancy was working, Nellie and I had a chance to climb one of the desert hills in Scottsdale nearby where he lived called Pinnacle Peak! The view was gorgeous! When we got to the top, Nellie hopped on a tall boulder and posed for a shot, armed spread wide, all her glory shining! Knowing the ups and downs she has gone through in recent years, I too was beaming with pride! If only I could have bottled an ounce of that moxie, fierceness, and energy, that uniquely Nellie Baxandall badassness that I love about her. And, I wonder if this is how Peter was feeling, bedazzled as he was by his own companions, wanting to grasp them and that moment and hold onto it forever. And yet, for me and for Peter ...the moment couldn't hold all it contained.

Did you see what Peter tried to do? As my brilliant colleague Matt Boulton has put it: "He stammers a suggestion: "Shall we build you three tents? It's a bumbling, endearing proposal, if a bit tone-deaf and presumptuous (after all, if these three great prophets wanted shelter, they likely would have already made arrangements!). Is Peter thinking of the Greek custom of building a shrine at the site of a god's appearance? Is he trying to corral the astounding wonder into something more manageable, more domesticated? Or is he simply "terrified" (9:6), grasping for something to say, something to offer?"²

Maybe it's all of the above! And maybe the takeaway for us is a simple recognition that we, like Peter, can behold God's glory wherever we might find it but never hold onto it! And much as I and we may try to manage, capture, domesticate, or control our big shining moments or even our shadow-filled change, it's too much!

And here, just here, is where the Spirit interrupts Peter's proposal! Coming through the clouds, as she did at Jesus' baptism, she makes it clear: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" As in "follow him!" As in he will show you the way! It's not about managing or framing anything! Leave your tents at home! It's about letting go and surrendering to God's loving presence that is with you at all times. Follow his beaming light and he will walk with you in the valleys of whatever suffering, grief, and death and he will lead you to new life and lightness of bearing! He will even say with you: "take this cup of suffering away from me! It's too full! Yet not my will but thine be done!" He will remember the cups of blessing too, and share them at a great banquet, cups that runneth over with joy and delight! Again, we don't have to hold it all. The pain and glory of the world is way too much. Yet when we recognize this limitation, as Peter surely did on the mountain, we can learn again to surrender ourselves to God's love and presence, in our stumbling and in our rising.

Easier said than done right? Just how are we meant to hold these moments, these overflowing cups of our suffering, blessing and everything in between. Awhile back, I discovered a spiritual practice that

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/6/transfiguration-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-6>

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I've been returning to lately called The Welcoming Prayer. It's grown out of the work and life of Father Thomas Keating and his followers. It's described as "a method of consenting to God's presence and action in our physical and emotional reactions to events and situations in daily life. The purpose of the Welcoming Prayer is to deepen our relationship with God through consenting in the ordinary activities of our day."³ It's designed to disrupt and dismantle our patterns of reaction that leave us holding onto our ego's desires for comfort, security and control and open to our soul's desire for connection and transformation. The practice goes like this, in three parts: 1. Focus, feel, and sink into. 2. Welcome, and 3. Let Go.

First, focus, feel, and sink into the feelings, emotions, thoughts, sensations, and commentaries in your body.

Second, welcome the Divine Indwelling in the feelings, emotions, thoughts, commentaries, ^[1]or sensations in your body. Here the invitation is to actually say or pray "Welcome."

Third, let go by repeating the following sentences:

"I let go of the desire for security, affection, control."

"I let go of the desire to change this feeling/sensation."

Father Keating himself prayed the prayer in this way:

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today, because I know it's for my healing. I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within. Amen.

The way this has been coming to me lately, and this past week especially...

Welcome grief...

Welcome gratitude...

Welcome disorientation, confusion, and unanswerable questions...

Welcome sleepiness and exhaustion...

Welcome discomfort at not being able to respond to everyone...

Welcome stress...

Welcome a narrow window or tolerance with those things that irritate or annoy me...

Welcome fear about it not working out...

Welcome envy for those who seemingly have it made...

³ <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/welcoming-prayer-method/>

Welcome joyful anticipation...

Welcome grief...

Welcome gratitude...

I let go of my desire to understand and find the perfect frame for this uncontainable experience.

I let go of my desire for power and control and affection and approval and security!

I open to the loving presence of God and God's action in my life!

I wonder how your welcoming prayers would go and wholeheartedly invite you to try this practice yourselves. Google “welcoming prayer” if you want some guidelines. Trust me, it helps! It's a powerful practice, sometimes shorthanded as “Consent on the Go!” As we cultivate this as a regular practice, the goal is to make room for and decenter our reactivity and desires and give *consent* to God to truly being at the center of our lives. *Stay* with this simple practice and a beautiful transformation, maybe even transfiguration may start to take hold!

I imagine Jesus on that mountaintop, and as the pinnacle peak of what consent to God looks like, the transfiguration a shining confirmation that he had truly opened his life to God's loving presence. He had learned the art of the overflowing cup that can never contain it all! Whether ascending a mountaintop, or descending into valleys of the shadows of death, he knew God was at the center! No wonder he lit up like that! He let go of fear and desire and surrendered it all until God's light and belovedness shown through him for all to see!

May we listen to him and follow his light, through the coming season of Lent, right into Holy Week and beyond! Amen.

