

# The Hardest Passage in the Bible

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
February 26, 2017—Transfiguration Sunday

- Matthew 17:1-9 <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard the voice, they were so terrified that they threw themselves face downward on the ground. <sup>7</sup>Jesus came to them and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid!” <sup>8</sup>So they looked up and saw no one there but Jesus.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God is mystery to be embraced and revered.

Great...! The sermon title says we’re dealing with “the hardest passage in the Bible.” That’s encouraging. But honestly, one New Testament scholar has suggested that the story we know as “The Transfiguration of Jesus” is “one of the most difficult [passages] in the New Testament.” The reason, he proposes, is that it’s presented as if it’s describing an historical event. But what it describes is so beyond human experience that it’s hard for us to take it as the reporting of an actual event.<sup>1</sup> In fact, over the centuries

Many explanations have been given for the origin of this story, from objective reporting of an event that literally happened..., through various explanations of a subjective vision... or dream... of the disciples or their misunderstanding of a natural event..., to a purely symbolic story [where every element in the story is intended to represent something]....<sup>2</sup>

As an example of the symbolic approach to understanding the Transfiguration story:

- The appearance of the monumental leader Moses and the bold prophet Elijah would be understood as connecting the ministry of Jesus with the historic foundations of the Jewish faith.
- The mountaintop location speaks to the ancient belief that mountaintops were “the border zone between earth and heaven.”<sup>3</sup>
- The mountaintop also brings to mind Moses meeting God face-to-face on Mount Sinai.
- The radiant face of Jesus reminds readers that the face of Moses also glowed after having encountered God on Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35).
- That both the face and the clothing of Jesus was radiating light suggests a preview of his resurrection.
- God’s pronouncement (“This is my son... listen to him,” etc.) is virtually identical to what was heard when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan.
- And what about Peter’s blabbering on about remembering this moment by building three tents or booths or monuments? If he could have, I bet Peter would have tried to take a “selfie” to preserve the moment with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. What does Peter’s stammering speech symbolize? I think it symbolizes that in the presence of mystery, maybe what we actually should do is simply stop and appreciate it as “mystery.”

What this biblical episode does very well is expose us to that characteristic of God that modernists like us don’t like to deal with: the dimension of mystery. By its very nature, we can’t define or explain or wrap our arms around that which is mysterious, as much as we may want to. We may enjoy the temporary mystery contained in a good crime novel or science-fiction thriller now and then. But in general we want to be able to figure out Life. We want to understand the world around us. We have an insatiable desire to discover, to understand, to control.

For instance, NASA announced this week the discovery of seven Earth-sized, habitable-zone planets in orbit around a small star in our neighborhood (about 40 light-years away). This discovery adds another

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R.A., Interpretation—a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Matthew. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993, 198.

<sup>2</sup> The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume VIII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 365

<sup>3</sup> Hare, 198.

building block of data to the foundation of knowledge that humankind is amassing to understand the mystery of the universe.

Or much closer to home, we could wake up each morning and guess how the day's weather would affect our wardrobe choices or impact our plans for the day. But no – we prefer the convenience provided by meteorologists whose forecasts remove some of the mystery about what the next hour, or four hours, or twenty-four hours might hold for us weather-wise. Yes, the more we're able to remove mystery from our lives, the more comfortable we tend to be.

But maybe we lose something, too, when we undermine the place of mystery. I'll give you an example.

The wildly-popular Broadway musical "Wicked" purports to tell what happened *before* the story we all know as "The Wizard of Oz." If you've ever seen "Wicked" you know that Act One closes with Elphaba the witch singing a stirring, powerful song called "Defying Gravity." True to the lyrics, as she sings the closing measures of the song Elphaba does defy gravity right on stage: without wires or harnesses or any other apparent support she suddenly rises perhaps fifteen feet above the rest of the cast onstage. Naturally I was intrigued by how live theatre could create that illusion.

I happened to have the chance to see the show several times within the space of a month. At subsequent performances, as that song reached that climactic point I studied the stage carefully and figured out how they created that illusion. (Ask me privately if you want to know.)

Since then I've seen the show one or two more times, and while the end of Act One is still thrilling, I must admit that it's lost something for me because some of the mystery of that theatrical illusion has been dispelled.

So even with our insatiable thirst for knowledge, for understanding, a part of us still appreciates mystery – the awe, the not-knowing, the wonder... We do have a hunger for mystery's incomprehensibility, majesty, our inability to express what it is or what it means.

And that's one way that the gospel story of the Transfiguration of Jesus serves us. The story reminds us that there's still a place in our lives for mystery.

We remember foremost that God is beyond our ability to comprehend, so living within the mystery that is our God, we can embrace life's passion and heartache and joy and uncertainty and exhilaration without ever attaining a complete understanding of God.

We're reminded that the same God who created all that we experience, all we know, chose to break through the barriers of time and space and come among us in a form we know intimately: our human form. Jesus of God became human: "how" is a mystery.

Jesus embodied God's passionate care for humankind, showing us that the depth of God's love for us would even sacrifice self for the sake of others. Jesus assures us that we can love that deeply, too; *how* we are able to share generously, love extravagantly, accept unconditionally when common sense urges otherwise... how we can rise above our primitive human instincts, *that's* a mystery.

Here's what I believe about the so-called "hardest passage in the Bible": it's not a literary puzzle to be solved. It describes something beyond our experience.

- Sure, we may have been on hilltops or even mountaintops, but not in the physical presence of Jesus of Nazareth.
- At some point certainly we have found ourselves in fog or clouds – maybe even within a shining cloud – but I doubt we heard the voice of God saying, "This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased – listen to him!"<sup>4</sup>

Despite the rich variety of experiences that fill our lives, there remains a dimension of mystery that we struggle even to put into words, much less explain. That mystery is God, and that mystery we embrace and revere:

God is like a Heavenly Father, Creator and Ultimate Power;  
 God is Incarnate in the Divine Son Jesus;  
 God is the Holy Spirit animating and inspiring all of Life.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 17:5 (Good News translation)