

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Dayton, Ohio

February 27, 2022 Transfiguration to the Lord Sunday  
Richard Baker

## **We Need Faith**

Focus: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.—Hebrews 11:1

Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards—Soren Kierkegaard

The heavenly beings are strange to mortal eyes, and yet they are not strange. When he saw them [at the moment of his death], he knew that he had always known them and realized what part each one of them had played at many an hour in his life when he had supposed himself alone, so that now he could say to them, one by one, not 'Who are you?' but 'So it was you all the time'. . . The dim consciousness of friends about him which had haunted his solitudes from infancy was now at last explained; that central music in every pure experience which had always just evaded memory was now at last recovered.—C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

### **First Scripture Lesson: Luke 9:28-36**

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent on the church calendar, when we remember Jesus 'going up the mountain with his disciples Peter, James and John, to pray.

And while Jesus is praying, and while Peter, James and John, were, well, dozing off . . . suddenly Jesus is transfigured, that is, he becomes radiant with light: his face begins to shine, his clothes become dazzling white. And then just as suddenly, there with him are Moses and Elijah in all their glory, the three of them talking about Jesus 'departure which he is about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

*It is a remarkable scene, made all the more remarkable by its conclusion in which a cloud overshadows Peter, James and John, striking terror into them, and then a voice from heaven addresses them. If they were drowsy before, they aren't anymore. Listen now for God's Word to us. The Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 9, verses 28-36:*

*About eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*

*Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they*

*were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said.*

*While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*

## **Second Scripture Lesson: Luke 9:43b-45**

Despite Peter’s offer to build dwelling places up there, they do come from that mountain. And what follows is different. If Jesus’ Transfiguration was a moment of resplendent and revelatory light, what follows is darkness and confusion. Jesus tells the disciples that when they arrive in Jerusalem he will be betrayed into human hands. And the disciples just don’t get it. Listen now for God’s Word, Luke Chapter 9, verses 43-45:

*While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.*

## **Sermon: We Need Faith**

We were at a wedding last fall, at the wedding reception actually, and I sat down next to a young man, the adult son of good friends, who had just received his Ph.D. Knowing the pressure to publish that young academics labor under, I asked, “So Brian, how’s your research coming?”

“Well, Richard, to get published in the social sciences these days, your findings have to be *both* counter-intuitive *and* intuitive.”

The reception was loud and getting louder—maybe I didn’t hear him right.

“Say that again, Brian?”

“Well, your conclusions have to be at first not at all obvious, and then perfectly obvious.”

Now I know it’s hard to get published these days, but this seemed ridiculous: “Once more?”

He smiled. “Well, you don’t want your findings to be so obvious that ‘well, everybody already knows that’; but you don’t want them to be so obscure that nobody can believe them or even understand them. What you want,” he continued, “is a conclusion that

nobody else has come up with, but once you explain it, everybody can see it: 'it makes perfect sense, it fits.' You see, Richard: 'Not at all obvious and then perfectly obvious.' 'Counter-intuitive and then intuitive.'" He was grinning now.

And actually, as we talked, I did see it. As I thought about the popular accounts of social science research I read online, on websites, in newspapers or magazines, it made sense; it fit. The articles almost always begin with a "who woulda thunk it?" tone, but end with a "it all fits perfectly, it's all so obvious" tone.

And as I thought about it some more, the same is true of stories, novels, movies, plays, tv shows, even jokes and puns and such like. Take a murder mystery, for example: if it's obvious "who done it" from the very beginning, then why bother? But if in the end, the solution just comes out of nowhere, makes no sense, what the ancients called a "deus ex machina," a contrived and forced ending—well, where's the fun in that?

No: what we want is a solution, a conclusion that we didn't at all see coming, but once you do see it, well, all the pieces fall into place, it fits perfectly, the clues were there all along, why didn't we see it coming?

And that's what we want in our lives, too. It's just that sometimes it takes a while; in fact, ultimately it may take our whole lives.

As you know, as I've preached before, we Presbyterians are big on "calling." We believe, we emphasize, that we are all called by God: first and foremost, we are all alike called to live a life of faith. But then each of us is also called to various tasks and jobs, undertakings, projects and endeavors—to teach, to sing, to love, to care to work—in the church, for example, to serve as an elder or deacon. Some callings are long, even life-long, others short; some coincide with paying occupations, many do not. "A calling," the Presbyterian author and pastor Frederick Buechner famously said, "is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

All well and good. But the big question then becomes, "What is my calling, our calling? How do we know what tasks, jobs, undertakings, God is calling us to do and when?"

And the answer?: A true calling is both counter-intuitive and intuitive; not at all obvious and then perfectly obvious; you don't at all see it coming, but once you do see it, well, all the pieces fall into place, it fits perfectly, the clues were there all along, why didn't we see it coming?

That's been my experience, at least, and I know the experience of many, many others. God is secretly at work in our lives preparing us for future callings, but we don't see it, don't recognize the clues as clues, until suddenly—finally, at last—there it is! We see it. Our God is a God of infinite surprise.

And this is especially true in our shared calling to live lives of faith. Look at Peter, James and John up there on that mountain seeing Jesus, Moses and Elijah in all their glory!

The transfiguration! What a vision it must have been! Now, it all made sense, all the pieces fell into place: the healings, the feeding of the 5,000, his calming the storm, his raising the widow's son, all the miracles, his forgiving sins, his preaching and teaching, his calling us to follow him—now it's so obvious. It has to be . . . He must be . . . He is the . . . And then the voice from heaven confirms it: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" That is our calling: to listen to him, to follow him, to believe that he is God's Son, the Chosen One, the Messiah. Our calling: Where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.

But then, almost immediately, for the disciples, after they come down from the mountain . . . well, listen again to Luke's Gospel:

*While everyone was amazed at all that Jesus was doing, he said to his disciples, "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.*

This saying—"The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands,"—doesn't sink into their ears; they don't get it; its meaning is concealed from them. And just like that, it's all incomprehension and uncertainty again. "What can *that* possibly mean? How does *that* make sense?," the disciples ask themselves. "What *were* Jesus, Moses, and Elijah saying about Jerusalem when we were so sleepy up there on the mountaintop?"

And so it is for us, too. Our lives in general, and certainly our lives in faith, alternate between these mountaintop moments of insight, certainty, and assurance, on the one hand, and those in-the-valley periods—and sometimes they're prolonged periods—of incomprehension and uncertainty, darkness and doubt, on the other.

And that's why we need faith. So we can keep going as we walk through those valley-of-the-shadow times. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of—that is, the ongoing belief and trust in—things unseen.

"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." In other words, much of the time, as we live our lives, we don't know what's going to happen: yes, looking backwards, we can see patterns, we can even see God's hand at work; but looking forward, we can't see the future, we don't know whether or how things are going to fit together or for that matter, fall apart.

Go back to this time exactly two years ago: did you have any idea all of this was going to happen? If you said yes, I don't believe you.

We don't know the future. But those mountaintop moments of clarity afford us a glimpse, a vision. In one way or another, to one degree or another, we see how things fit together, how they have come together, and are coming together. We can see a pattern: and thus we can have faith in there still being some kind of pattern, *even* when we can no longer see one. Faith is the conviction of things unseen.

Those mountaintop moments sustain us, they can help us to keep the faith, they can strengthen our faith. Yes, they are only for a time—if, like Peter, we think we can stay up there on the mountaintop (“Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”), we don't know what we're talking about. But they are still important.

After the disciples come down from the mountain, as they walk with Jesus through that dark valley to Jerusalem where the Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands, I have to believe that what they saw on that mountaintop helped them to keep the faith. What's going to happen in Jerusalem will make not sense to them while it is happening—it will all be darkness and uncertainty. In fact, they themselves (including Peter) will play a part in his betrayal. But afterwards, after his betrayal and crucifixion, when they are gathered together in that upper room, the risen Jesus comes to them and says:

“Look at my hands and my feet, and you can see—it's me. Touch me and see.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.”

A sight that by comparison must have made the transfiguration look ordinary—a sight both counter-intuitive and intuitive; not at all obvious and then perfectly obvious; one they didn't at all see it coming, but once they did see it, well, all the pieces fell into place, it fits perfectly, the clues were there all along, why didn't we see it coming?

Our God is a God of infinite surprise.

And so it will be for us, too. At the end of our earthly pilgrimages, when we cross the bar from this world into the next . . . C.S. Lewis describes it this way:

*We will not say ‘Who are you?’ but ‘So it was you all the time’. . . The dim consciousness of friends about us which had haunted our solitudes from infancy will now at last be explained; that central music in every pure experience which had always just evaded memory will now at last be recovered.*

That central music in every pure experience which had always just evaded memory will then, at last, be recovered. But in the meantime, we need faith, especially right now in our world.

With events over the past two weeks in Eastern Europe, it seems that we're once again down in the valley of the shadow of darkness. Where is God's hand in all this? It's hard to see.

And yet I still believe that, during our lifetimes, there have been moments when we have seen the God-given human longing for dignity, self-determination, and freedom assert itself: moments when walls have been torn down; authoritarian regimes, toppled; despots and dictators, deposed. And try as they might, and they will try with all their might, today's despots and dictators cannot stomp out that God-given human longing. And even now, amidst all the darkness, if we look, if we have eyes to see, we can see that human longing re-asserting itself in surprising ways. And we need to recall those moments when we have seen it, and when we do see it, especially in times when it seems like we don't. We need faith.

And because we need faith, we need the church, and we need *this* church to be, here—to help us to keep the faith, to strengthen our faith. That is our promise, as a congregation, to Gwyneth and her parents, that we will nurture her, and support them, in the faith. And that is not only a blessing and a gift that we can give them, it is also central to our calling as a church.

About three years ago, our Session adopted a Ministry Master Plan, in which we in which we recognized Westminster as called to be (1) a mission church, (2) a music church, (3) a teaching church, and (4) a caring church. “A place where neighbor is loved and welcomed; the poor served; justice and peace, fostered; and all are invited to share the journey of discipleship.”

That is our calling—where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

And even through the darkness and uncertainty of the past two years, there have been moments—many moments and many of them more than moments—when all the pieces have fallen into place, when everything did fit together perfectly, and our calling as a church became even more clear.

As a *mission* church, our ID Ministry was recognized in 2021 by The Greater Dayton Lawyers Project, and Legal Aid of Western Ohio, with The Patricia Rousseau Community Advocacy award, as part of the Access to Justice Awards. More than that, we have now teamed up with Ambassador Tony Hall and the Hall Huger Initiative to form the Community ID Program.

As a *music* church, we have been able to continue repair work on our organ through the Westminster Music Fund in Honor of John W. Neely. And although we still have a ways to go, the choir no longer sings in fear of that cabinet collapsing and those pipes crashing down on them.

As a *teaching* church we have found new energy for our Children's and Family's Ministries through the work of our Director Kylie Hettinger.

As a *caring* church, last year, we bade a heartfelt farewell to Sue Hamilton—a poignant moment for us. But next month, we will also welcome the Reverend Dr. Caitlin Deyerle and her family as our new Pastor for Congregational Care.

And, as a *mission, music, teaching, and caring* church, we have found two gifted young residents, Mary Hoffman and Jason Steiner, and we have been able to give them a home to live in and a church to work in, while they have blessed us with their talents, enthusiasm and friendship.

Through all these moments of clarity and many more like them, our calling as a church has become more clear, and our faith in Our Lord who calls us, stronger. These moments sustain us, help us to keep the faith, strengthen our faith in the months and years ahead.

And that's good, because we need that—we need faith. Because we don't know the future; because life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forward; because we can't always see the glory of the Lord; because our lives in general, and certainly our lives in faith, alternate between these mountaintop moments of insight, certainty, and assurance and those in-the-valley periods of incomprehension and uncertainty, darkness and doubt—because of all that, we need faith. Faith is the conviction of things unseen.

This church is here—to help us to find and keep that faith, to strengthen our faith. That is God's promise to us: to be here with us and for us because we need faith.

But not forever. Because there will come a day when we no longer need faith; a day when we see face to face, a day when we hear fully that central music in every present pure experience which for now always just evades our memory; a day when: “Not at all obvious and then perfectly obvious.” “Counter-intuitive and then intuitive.”

‘So it was you all the time.’

“Look at my hands and my feet, and you can see—it's me.”

Our God is a God of infinite surprise.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

