

In 1928, German Theologian Karl Barth published a book titled, “The Word of God and the Word of Man.” The second chapter is titled, “The Strange New World Within the Bible.” I first heard of this 20 years ago in a seminary class I took on the life, writings, and theology of Karl Barth. I have never forgotten it, because it is so true. The Bible introduces us to a God who loves us, who is for us, who pursues us, who dies for us. That is strange. And then there are events and happenings that are strange too: water from rock, manna from heaven, seas parting, lions’ dens being survived, miraculous healings, skies darkened, a tomb emptied – and don’t even get me started on Revelation. The Bible is full of the strange.

And today’s passage is one of those passages that is indeed strange. It is very unordinary. In front of Peter, James, and John, high up on a mountain, Jesus is “transfigured before them.” If Mark (or Matthew or Luke, who also record this event) didn’t explain for us what this means, we’d be a little hard pressed to know what is meant. The dictionary definition is one thing. It means to “transform into something more beautiful or elevated” (Oxford, online). The Greek word is *metamorphothay*, which is the passive form of the verb *metamorpho-o*. And it means to be transformed, or to be changed. The Gospels tell us that Jesus’ clothes started to gleam like lightning.

And this transfiguration of Jesus is maybe the most memorable part of this passage – though certainly the appearance of Elijah and Moses is also memorable, as is the voice of the Heavenly Father. Three unusual things in one event: Peter, James, and John really got the trifecta of the “strange new world” as Barth calls it. But in this passage are some deep things for us to learn about Jesus and what it means to be his follower.

First of all, Jesus models for us a significant part of how to disciple another person and develop Christian leaders as he brings Peter, James, and John up on this mountain to experience this event. **Inviting people to join you side-by-side in your own spiritual journey gives other people opportunities to observe, to participate, and ultimately to grow in faith and be shaped by**

God. The most impactful, spiritually-shaping part of these verses is clearly what happened on the mountaintop, and Jesus doesn't say a word, which I think is important to note. Yes, the disciples asked him a question on the way down, and he responded. But the "main event" was just them observing and listening. All Jesus did was invite them to come along with him and participate with him.

This is a relatively low-risk and easily repeatable way to help shape other disciples, or even to reach people who are not yet disciples of Jesus'. Let me share with you an example that happened recently. A month ago, three of us from Rose Hill went to our denomination's annual National Gathering. Essentially, it's a conference for ECOⁱ church pastors, elders and ministry leaders. It's kind of like a transfiguration event. Jesus doesn't come and glow in bright white, but it is a mountaintop experience, and incredibly spiritually enriching. Most years, an elder from the church joins me. This year, that was Steve Smith.

This year we sent a third person because at the National Gathering they did a new thing, and that was to have a special Youth part of the gathering. It included a 5 or 6-hour preconference seminar on Monday that was geared toward youth as well as youth leaders. Then throughout the rest of the conference whenever we had breakout sessions, there were special sessions for the youth who were there. They did have to miss four days of school in order to do this, so it was a big sacrifice – if missing school is to be considered a sacrifice.

Anyway, churches were encouraged to send a teenager who demonstrated Christian leadership in the church, and showed promise as a future leader in the church as well. The idea, really, is the same as we see Jesus doing here: bring someone along to let them observe, soak things in, and experience the conference as a way of developing them as disciples and shaping them as future church leaders. Our Elders felt that Hailey North fit the criteria, not only because of her church participation but also because of her initiative and leadership of starting a Christian club at her school, and discipling kids through this ministry she's started. So she got to go to the National Gathering as well.

I think it's fair to say that for all three of us, going to this event is like Peter, James, and John, getting to go with Jesus up the mountain...but especially for the youth who were there, it was an opportunity for them to come along side experienced church leader and certainly participate....but also to watch, listen, and just soak it all in.

What is some facet of your faith walk that you could invite someone along with you, and who might that be? Someone sitting with you in church this morning, perhaps? A relative, such as a grandchild, or a sibling, or child, or neighbor who could join you for something?

Let me just mention a few ways you could do this, to get your brain thinking about possibilities. Let's say you're a leader of a small group. Is there someone you could you invite – perhaps from within the group or from outside – to come alongside you and learn how to lead a group of their own, enabling us to disciple more people in small groups? Or if you're a discipleship class leader on Sunday mornings, you could do the same thing.

Or next fall, when we do the operation Christmas Child shoeboxes (and by the way, one of the four keynote speakers at the National Gathering was from Egypt and he happened to mention this ministry and what a blessing it is when the shoeboxes arrive) ...but when we do that next fall, maybe you could invite someone to come alongside you to fill their own shoebox. You could invite your friends, neighbors, classmates of your kids or grandkids. Anytime we are serving others is an opportunity invite someone along to join us in that service – delivering food at a food bank, preparing and taking a meal to a new mom, and so forth. It might be someone who's already a disciple and you're helping them to grow in their faith and Christian leadership...or it could even be reaching out to someone who's *not* yet a Christian, and inviting them to join you. In a nutshell, whatever it is that you do in the name of the Lord Jesus, consider how you could invite someone along with you to experience that so they would also grow in their own faith development. That's what Jesus did here with Peter, James, and John.

The second thing to take away from this, and it is perhaps a little bit in

contrast to the previous point...or perhaps it's more accurate to say that it is in *preparation* for the previous point, is this: **Make sure you're taking time to just sit and listen and be with Jesus.** We see this here in a couple different ways – one is negative, the other is positive. First, we see that Peter wants to do something when the transfiguration happens and Moses and Elijah are there. He wants to build three shelters for Jesus and the two distinguished guests. And sometimes, this is our immediate response as Christians as well: We gotta *do* something. We need to go here, do that, build this, start that, get this thing up and running, connect with this organization, serve here, serve there, create this, lead here, shape this thing, attend that event...I mean, it can get overwhelming.

And for sure, there are things we need to do. Jesus commands us to *go, make disciples* of all nations, *teaching people* to obey everything that he's taught us. There's a lot of action there. We all know that "love" is a verb and we're to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves. And it's all founded on the fact that God first loved us...and there's a lot of action in God's love. In fact, in the verses immediately after this passage, Jesus dives right back into ministering to people. There's a lot of ministry action right after this little sabbatical. So there's lots of action in our faith, for sure. And we don't want to forget that.

But first, we must simply *be with and listen to Jesus.* This is a discipline we must regularly come back to, and we see it emphasized here. Verse 7: "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to Him." Listening to Jesus means setting aside time from the busyness of life – even the busyness of ministry – to get re-centered on Jesus for our own spiritual nourishment. We need times like we read about in this passage where we get away from the crowds of people, get away from the pressures of life, and just spend time with Jesus.

And it's not that we can't listen to Jesus in the midst of the busyness of life. We don't have to take a weekend retreat or a day off of work to do this. In fact, the Father's voice tells them to listen to him, and then they come down the mountain. So their listening isn't really done up there on the mountain top in a retreat away from the crowds of people and the pressures of ministry and life. Their listening takes place throughout Jesus' ministry, once they come

down from the mountaintop experience.

And this is what the season of Lent is really about. **Lent started this last Wednesday evening with Ash Wednesday and continues right up to Resurrection Sunday.** And it's traditionally a season of honest self-reflection and listening to Jesus – usually in the midst of regular, everyday life. That means finding some time to be still, to take a long, hard look in the mirror and to peer deep into our souls. And as we do that, we listen to the voice of Jesus – through His Spirit, through His Word, through others Christians who might speak into our lives...and we listen to Him inviting us into a deeper relationship with Him.

In my most recent Newsletter article I quote from Ruth Haley Barton, founder of the Christian organization called the Transforming Center, whose ministry goal is “to strengthen the soul of your leadership.” She was also one of the keynote speakers at our National Gathering a few weeks ago. In a recent blog post, Ruth writes, **“The Lenten journey is patterned after Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness where we too, must face the subtle temptations to the false self [selfishness] so that we can be “cleared out” for real ministry. Here we face our own demons and they are rarely what we think! It is not just the temptation to drink pop or eat sweets or enjoy a glass of wine—as real as those temptations become after we have given them up for Lent! In the emptiness created by whatever it is we are fasting from, we become more aware of the compulsions of the false self and it is pretty ghastly stuff” (Ruth Haley Barton).** When Jesus was in the wilderness for those 40 days, he fasted in prayed. It was a serious time of self-reflection, of preparation, of leaning into His Heavenly Father, of reflecting on His true identity and what His God-given mission was.

We need that same kind of reflection and time spent listening to Jesus. Your heavenly father knows you do. Here they are on this mini wilderness retreat and God says to them, “Listen to Him!” And he still tells us this same thing. I encourage you to do so this Lent. To fast from something...to set something aside that you compulsively do, and make some space for God’s voice to be heard.

The end result is that you, like Jesus in this event, would also be transfigured for God's glory. It's an inner work that God does through His Spirit when we listen to Jesus. In His letter to the Galatians, Paul makes this statement to the church there in Galatia, **"I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed (morpho-o) in you..." (Galatians 4:19)**. Remember earlier we said that "be transfigured" is "metamorpho-o" – it's a compound word, and here in Galatians Paul uses the latter half of that compound word on its own. Christ is *formed in us*. This is the aim of discipleship. This is *our* transformation – that we would be more Christ-like; and it is our own transfiguration. In fact, Paul writes elsewhere: **"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (metamorpho-o) by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2)**. Be "metamorpho-oed;" be transformed...or as we read in today's passage: Be transfigured. It's the exact same word used to describe what happens to Jesus. That's what happens to us, also. No, your clothes won't gleam like lightening like Jesus' did. If you want that, do your laundry, and use bleach for the whites. That's a free tip for you today. Rather, the transfiguration you'll experience will be an inner one, a deep work of God's Spirit in you as we become more Christ-like, as Christ is formed in us.

So spend some time listening to Jesus between now and Easter. Not that you should stop then...but this a time where God's people, like Jesus in the wilderness, like he does here with Peter, James, and John...**Lent is a season where we intentionally set time aside to reflect on ourselves, be with and listen to Jesus, and let God's Spirit move so that we might be transformed. That's the deeper life with Jesus we are invited into.** Maybe it means going to a mountaintop like Jesus did, or some other secluded place. But it can be done right where you live, too. The point is to spend time with Jesus listening to Him. It almost certainly means turning off your phone and the computer and the tv and the stereo...talk about a strange new world: Can you imagine a stretch of life without them? But maybe those are the places where the "false self" lives. And then it's filling that space with time with God: in prayer, in worship, in self-reflection, reading Scripture, and so forth. Maybe, as Jesus did, you invite a few other people to join you in this journey just as Jesus brought Peter, James, and John. However it takes shape for you, let's get centered on Jesus this Lent. And just as Jesus came down the mountain and re-entered into ministry and started doing all kinds of stuff to

bless people and introduce them to the Kingdom of God, I pray we might also be invigorated to be His hands and feet, making disciples of Jesus in all that we say and do.

ⁱ ECO is the short-hand for our denomination: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.