

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
*Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on March 3, 2019 (Transfiguration, Year C)*

Last spring, Andrew and I had the opportunity to walk the Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St. James, a pilgrimage to the place St. James, the very James mentioned in this Gospel, is buried. (Spoiler alert! I'll be talking about this more in the Lenten Series next week.) Andrew and I walked from St. Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenees across most of northern Spain, about 500 miles.

I'd dreamed of this trip for ten years. The people I know who'd done it all said it was amazing. And yet, in the days and weeks before I went, I grew more afraid. I'd read books and watched movies and made about 40 trips to REI. We'd trained. But I didn't *really* know what it was going to be like. And what's more, that dream took root in my twenties, when I was routinely doing adventurous things. But now, I'd become something of a homebody. I was nervous about being away from home, from the place that was comfortable and familiar and safe, for so long.

But I'd committed to this. And I went. Having finished it, I can tell you that it *was* amazing. Sometimes. There were literal mountaintop moments in the most beautiful places I've ever been. Drinking a café con leche in solitude at a sun drenched café, deeply contented. Running into pilgrim friends we hadn't seen for weeks. The moment we saw the spires of the Cathedral in the distance, and then arriving and just sitting on the ground in the square, taking it in. And some of it was awful. Days where every step was painful. Bed bugs, which was less about the bites than the resulting, sleepless paranoia. Food poisoning, twice, including on an 18km stretch with nothing but open fields. In the rain. And to be very honest, sometimes it was just kind of boring. I'd keep putting one foot in front of the other, and try to make it through.

This is what's on my mind as we hear this week's Gospel, what we call the Transfiguration. Jesus has gone up to the mountain to pray with his closest friends. And suddenly, he is transformed into the most true version of himself, light leaking from his pores, clothes stripped of the dust and dirt to a dazzling white. Beside him stand Moses and Elijah. A cloud overtakes them, and voice from it says, "This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him." This story is full of mystery and glory.

I will confess that I kind of hate this story. Part of it is that it comes every year, demanding that preachers find words in the face of that which leaves Peter senseless. And part of it is the shininess, the glory. It makes me suspicious. Most of the time, my life doesn't feel like that. So I'm not sure what the Transfiguration has to say to me.

But the Transfiguration is not the whole story. It is part of a larger picture. Just before this Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples for the first time what it really means to be the Son of God. That he will undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed. This is such a surprise to the disciples that in two of the Gospels, Peter promptly reprimands Jesus for saying such a terrible thing. And as if that wasn't enough to take in, Jesus goes on to tell them the hard news that anyone who wishes to be his disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. All of that comes just before this passage. Afterwards, it doesn't get any better. Jesus comes down from the mountain, and sets his face for Jerusalem. He summons up all of his courage and strength and begins the journey towards the place where he knows he will be crucified.

So I have great compassion for Peter, who has just received this hard news, news that upends everything he thought he knew. It is good to be here, on this mountain, apart from the crowds that are desperate for good news and for healing, and from those who will soon begin to plot Jesus' death. It's good to be here where the truth is so clear, and where it is beautiful and safe.

But you cannot have safety and glory. A few years ago, I took a class designed by mindfulness pioneer Jon Kabat-Zinn. His seminal book on the subject is called *Full Catastrophe Living*. He writes, "Catastrophe here does not mean disaster. Rather, it means the poignant enormity of our life experience." It's the glory and the struggle, the pain and the joy, the boredom and anxiety, all of it. The purpose of the class was to learn how not to do all the strategies we use to avoid the present moment—the distractions, the numbing, the barriers we erect to protect ourselves. Just beginning to learn these practices took eight weeks of classes, during which we spent an hour each day doing mindfulness practices. The choice, in this case, is black and white. You can protect yourself, placing a buffer between you and life, or you can experience the full catastrophe. You can have safety or you can have glory and also struggle and pain and the whole poignant enormity of human experience.

God chose to leave the safety and the detachment of the heavens to become human. And on the very first Sunday of this Season after Epiphany, we remembered Jesus' baptism. In that baptism, Jesus felt behind relative safety, stability, and obscurity to begin his ministry. In that baptism, he chose to become vulnerable to suffering and struggle and to glory. There could be no other way. There is no transfiguration, no resurrection, without the passion and death. There is no glory without the struggle.

As it is for Jesus, so it is for us. And it begins here, with baptism. We Christians sometimes think of baptism as a kind of spiritual protection. In a way that's true, but maybe not in the way that we might imagine. These baptismal waters are anything but tame. They are made of the same elements as tsunamis and floods, blizzards and hurricanes. And they are made of the same elements as the Red Sea and the Jordan. In baptism, we are taken from the comfort and familiarity of our parents' arms and plunged into this wild water, and into the life of Jesus. As much as we might long for it, it does not protect from danger. And it does not protect us from hell. We never needed that. None of us, baptized or not, is beyond the reach of God's care. The protection we receive in the waters of baptism is the assurance that we are united with Christ and each other. And because of that whatever might happen to us, danger and death and evil will not have the last word. That assurance prepares us to follow Jesus in leaving behind safety and familiarity and comfort for the full catastrophe, for the struggle and pain and joy, and yes, for the glory for which we were made. Amen.