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At Asbury United Methodist Church for Lenten Series Week 2  
March 8, 2023*

*Based on Mark 9:2-8. The Transfiguration of Jesus.*

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I had just begun my second year of seminary when news of yet another mass shooting reached our gathered community of scholars and spiritual seekers and pastors-in-training. An Amish School for girls. Remember? October 2006. Half of them dead. Half of them wounded.

On my progressive, activist seminary campus, very smart students took their pain to their brains, studying everything we could about what greater theologians than I have said and written about why a good God allows evil in the world. About the symbolism of God's solidarity with a suffering humanity through the cross. About the nature of forgiveness as we watched the Amish community release the gunman from what we all agreed would have been a rightful moral judgment upon his actions. Over-achieving students took their studies to the streets and rallied movements on campus to advocate for tougher gun control around the country.

One very smart, very over-achieving student was just plain heartsick. Angry. Paralyzed. None of her normal coping mechanisms were working. A few days after the shooting, she called out to anyone on campus with eyes to see and ears to hear to gather with her in the chapel for a time of prayer and supplication. I would add that she was one who would normally say the *right* way to pray was to get up and *do* something. Not, in her words, *simply sit in a chapel and say a few words and call it spiritual!*

But she did gather us. And we did pray. We lit candles. We sang songs. We cried. We held each other tight. And our chaplain said the following words, which have guided my understanding of prayer ever since: "My belief about prayer," she said, "is that it transcends time and space. I believe that when we pray," she said, "we no longer live in chronological time but are instead connected to the entire cosmos throughout the ages. And I believe that in this moment, as we pray, we are standing right beside those girls, we are *with* them, just as God is with them, even in the moment they feel most alone, most afraid, most forsaken, by God and by humanity. In prayer," she said, "we hold those girls just as we hold each other, in a communion of saints, and these candles we light in the midst of this darkness surround them in their fear with light and with hope and with love.

Those words became even more poignant during the prayer vigils that emerged in the wake of the mass shooting and assassination attempt of Gabrielle Giffords, in Tucson, Arizona, where I was serving my first church. I promise you, as a Pastor leading a community through unspeakable trauma, we could feel you praying for us in your vigils across the country. When I closed my eyes, begging for wisdom from on high, I could see the light of your candles shining a glimmer of hope through the darkness we endured.

This is what it is to be in community with the saints, I thought then and still think now. Surrounded in a vigil of prayer by a steadfast, never-quitting, never-failing, always-with-us, through thick and thin power that is love, both human and divine, that will not ever let us go.

Two months after that shock and trauma, with our congregation still reeling, Transfiguration Sunday rolled around, Gospel of Matthew version. As I prepared for that sermon, it occurred to me that this story of the transfiguration of Jesus made a whole lot more sense if we understood it as a prayer vigil. That this moment on the mountain connects Jesus to the entire cosmos throughout the ages in prayer, outside of chronological time, just like all the prayer vigils we hold whenever something tragic happens.

As I prepared for that sermon, it occurred to me that the Transfiguration Sunday we continue to honor every year on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday has in fact become something of a liturgically imposed annual prayer vigil for Jesus, in which through the prayer of our worship, time and space collapses into one moment, and we, too, become part of the communion of saints surrounding him, along with everyone who has come before Jesus (represented by Moses and Elijah) and the people who have known Jesus best in his life and ministry (represented by Peter and James and John).

In fact, I would suggest we are all, right now, even in this very moment, through the prayer of our proclamation of the story in *this* service of worship, surrounding Jesus with light and love, with wholeness and hope, with lament and with healing, as he prepares to endure the un-endurable. And through the prayer of our proclamation of the story in our worship, as a communion of saints, we are doing the very same thing for all who suffer unjustly.

The difference, of course, between Jesus and the Amish schoolgirls and our friends who were killed in Tucson and others who are the victims of senseless, unjust violence is that, according to our Scriptures, Jesus has a choice about his fate. He has, in fact, informed the disciples what to expect in the preceding pericope.

But just because Jesus has some sense of what will come does not mean he wants to suffer. And it most certainly does not mean that he wants *us* to suffer. He does not. Later in the Gospel of both Matthew and Mark, Jesus is very clear. He does not want to die. "My Father," he prays, "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." And later, on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!" he cries. How many times could we cry that with him?

Our brains and our activism and our fervent pleas for a different ending simply cannot save Jesus from his fate, any more than they can change what happened to those girls in the Amish school, any more than they can change what happened to us in Tucson on January 8<sup>th</sup> 2011, any more than they can change what has happened within the broken hearts and broken lives of so many people who never tell a soul about the cross they have endured.

The truth is, most of creation truly is praying in an everlasting vigil, living in the agony of Holy Saturday: that day between the crucifixion and the resurrection when the worst that can happen is over but we have no idea how we will find a resurrection. Most of creation is already praying through the suffering that somehow, somehow, resurrection will be the final answer.

And it will be! Someday, one day, it *will* be.

In the meantime, as we pray, we stand beside one another, in solidarity with one another, as God as in solidarity with us, even in the moment we feel most alone, most afraid, most forsaken, by God and by humanity. In the meantime, we hold onto one another in a communion of saints, with candles to light in the midst of the darkness, to surround one another in our fear, with light and with hope, and with love.