



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 9:28-36

March 2, 2025

Credo ut Intelligam

It is striking to me that the church re-tells the story of Jesus' transfiguration every year. I can understand why we talk about Christmas every year, and why we annually re-tell the story of Jesus' death on Good Friday and resurrection on Easter Sunday. But why talk every year about this mountaintop event in which Jesus, in glowing apparel, appeared beside Moses and Elijah?

There's no denying it is an important story. That moment on the mountaintop was a turning point. It marked the transition from Jesus' early ministry to when he set his face to go to Jerusalem for his final days on earth. It is also a story about the coming together of the Old Testament and the New Testament – connecting the history of the Hebrew people, as represented by Moses and Elijah, to the bigger, more universal, covenant revealed in Jesus Christ. And the transfiguration event captured the idea of how heaven and earth can truly come together. It was as if, for a moment, the physical world and the spiritual world were side by side in all their glory.

I think those are the reasons why we remember this story every year. It sets the stage for the tragic drama about to unfold in Jerusalem. It grounds that drama in the tradition of Moses. And it invites us to see a world where heaven and earth are united, by believing that this solitary figure can combine the best of what is human with the fullness of what is divine.

Now, I know, I know – professing Jesus' divinity is a hard sell in today's modern and skeptical age. We are comfortable focusing on his teachings, his acts of kindness, and his wisdom about what matters in life. But the same bible that gives us Jesus' teachings also contains lots of stories about Jesus doing miraculous things – healing people, calming storms, raising people from the dead. Some people choose to skip over those stories or write them off as primitive parables. However, others have grappled with them and humbly said that even if we don't understand fully how it is possible, the bible clearly points us to a Jesus who is both fully human and fully divine.

So this Transfiguration Sunday, let's grapple with that idea. Earlier I played for you the "Pavane" by Gabriel Faurè. I mentioned that what was distinctive about this piece is that one hand plays staccato while the other hand plays legato – two opposite approaches combined in one composition. Normally we think that opposite things cancel each other out – light chases away darkness, sustained notes overpower short notes. But opposites can co-exist in this world. Think of fields dappled by light and dark spots. Think about

foods that combine salty and sweet, or sweet and sour. Think about light beams that scientists consider to be both waves and particles.

Or think about yourself. You are a mixture of body and mind, of flesh and spirit. That complexity is not something to be denied, but something to be celebrated, for it is at the heart of what makes life wonderful and awesome. And if we believe in God and believe that God cares about us, then there have to be places where God's being and our being intersect and come together – where those two realities create a new piece of music. How this human-divine connection precisely works is less important than simply allowing ourselves to trust that, yes, it does happen within us all.

But how do I get to that point where I can turn off my doubting mind and accept the idea that all around me, heaven and earth are coming together? Well, lots of writers have tried to capture what this moment feels like. Plato talked about being in a cave, believing that all reality was simply the shadows cast by a fire against a dark wall, until at last you turn around and step out of the cave to see the full wonder of creation.

And here in Luke's gospel there is another version of this. Our passage describes Peter, James and John as being weighed down with sleep – dozing off while Jesus prayed a little ways away. But then they become wide awake and see Jesus in all his glory with Moses and Elijah beside him. They aren't sure what to say and do, and Peter makes an awkward suggestion about building booths to shelter Jesus' guests. In the end, it describes a moment when heaven and earth came together, and even if they didn't understand what was happening, the disciples were changed by what they'd seen.

Which brings me to my sermon title. There are paid consultants who advise churches on how to increase their membership. Not a single one of them, though, would recommend having your sermon title be written in Latin. Yet that's what I did today: *Credo ut intelligam*. Credo means "I believe." Intelligam means "I understand." And the little word "ut" means "in order to." *I believe in order to understand*. St. Augustine said something like this back in the 5th century, and then the phrase was popularized by the former archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm, in the 11th century. To help you remember what the phrase means, I've put the relevant quote from Anselm on the bulletin cover. (See back page.)

The modern world around us would have you reverse the verbs in Anselm's motto. It insists that it is more important to understand first and then we can believe and have faith. That is why some people insist it is more important to rationally understand how miracles happen or how a resurrection is possible or how one historic figure from long ago can be fully human and fully divine. But to understand in this way is just a synonym for being in control – as if to say, "I need to fully understand all these things, to be master of these mysteries of the universe. Only then will I consent to believe and trust them to be

true." Like a petulant toddler, we stamp our feet and make our ultimatums to the God we'll only believe in when all our questions have been answered to our satisfaction.

But like a loving parent, a calm answer comes back to us, saying "Let's be honest, there are lots of things you believe in but don't fully understand. You don't really know what makes your car work when you turn the key, or how your computer works when you hit the "on" button. You don't understand crypto-currency or the intricacies of quantum physics, but you believe in those things. There are lots of things in this life that are beyond your full understanding - things that transcend you, like goodness, truth, beauty, and love. You can glimpse parts of those things, but you cannot grasp them in their full splendor. That is why the better path to follow is "credo ut intelligam." Believe in things like goodness, beauty and truth. Believe the divine comes close to us mortals. Believe as if you're waking up from a deep sleep and struggling to see clearly what is before you. But then look closely at what you see and I promise you, you'll gain enough understanding for the journey ahead. Credo ut intelligam."

Now back to our original question: Why is this story of the Transfiguration told every year? It's not an easy story to wrap our heads around. It tells us to look at Jesus as the Christ in glowing raiment. It asks us to imagine one who is fully human and fully divine. And then, when that image is burned onto our retina, we blink and look with the same eyes at what comes next - Jesus abused and crucified and buried in a tomb, a Savior who emerges three days later from the grave, a Redeemer who ascends to heaven yet also promises to be with us until the end of the age. This story also tells us to gather around a table and eat bread and drink juice and dare to see it as so much more - the bread of life and a communion of saints. This story quietly reminds us to quit asking so many questions and dare to believe, and in that belief to find ourselves glimpsing what is most true about life. And in doing that, we finally understand - even as if seen in a mirror dimly.

We come to understand that sometimes staccato and legato can combine in a single melody. Sometimes light and shadow come together as a single work of art. Sometimes we glimpse a bit of what is good, true, and beautiful and that sustains our weary spirits. This leads us to gather in church to talk about Jesus, professing him to be fully human and fully divine - the One who was, who is, and who is to be. We hold onto that idea when the world around us appears to be crumbling, when illness and death remove from us the ones we love. Yet in that belief, we are comforted. We are reassured. We find the strength to go forward by faith.

At the Transfiguration, none of what I've just spoken about was mentioned by Christ. The entire event passed away as if in a dream. But before they left that place, a voice spoke from the heavens, saying "Listen to him." So let's start there. In Jesus we see God looking toward us and us looking to God, the divine and human in close proximity. For now, listen to him. Trust and believe. It's truly all we need for the journey ahead. AMEN

For our prayer, hear these words from St. Anselm:

O Lord, you are my Lord and my God, yet I have never seen you. You have created and redeemed me, and have conferred on me all my goods, yet I know you not. I confess, O Lord, and give you thanks, that you have created me in your image, so that I might be mindful of you and contemplate you and love you. I seek not to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand. Amen.