

# Purposeless Worship

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
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## **Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17: 1-9**

The wondrous, mysterious and yes, downright strange, story of Jesus' Transfiguration. The light, the cloud, the voice, the presence of Moses and Elijah....what do you suppose it all means?

First, I want to be sure that we see the connection between Matthew's version of this story and the story of Moses on the mountain found in the Old Testament Book of Exodus. I want us to see it because Matthew certainly wants us to see it. Both stories involve a mountaintop experience, a cloud, the voice of God. In both stories a significant revelation takes place: Moses receives God's word, the law; Jesus is revealed as the very embodiment of God's word, the word made flesh. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is part of a larger, sacred narrative that is more than just him...more than just Christianity. Jesus links us to that history, that past, even as he points us on a new path to the future. In understanding Moses' story, we begin to understand more of the Jesus' story. How tempting it is to believe that our story, the Christian story, exists in isolation. We are unique, we are special, God loves us best. But we lose so much, our vision become dangerously narrow, if we cut ourselves off from the rich stories and traditions and people of our wider human family, stories we are part of, stories that have shaped us even as they shaped Jesus.

So certainly this is part of what the Transfiguration story is all about: Jesus – connected to the traditions of Moses and the prophets even as he is revealed as God's chosen one, the fulfillment of the law and prophets. But there is something else I would like to say about this story...and it starts with a song: "The Marvelous Toy" (song was played for the congregation)

You never know what might pass for theology around here on a Sunday morning. But when I hear the timeless story of Jesus' transfiguration, I feel a lot like the boy in the song as he gazes at his marvelous, but mysterious toy: "I never knew just what it was and I guess I never will." It is absolutely wonderful, but I'm not sure what it means, what it really is. Is the Transfiguration something that demands to be explained? Or could it be something, again much like that toy, that is best simply enjoyed and savored for its own sake without our seeking rational meaning and explanation, without us asking about its purpose?

Confession time...I am not sure I practice what I am about to preach. I am a man whose life is consumed with purpose, prudence and usefulness. I go to bed at night haunted by all the time I wasted during the day, time when I could have been doing something. Just enjoying and savoring a day, a moment, a worship service, for its own sake with no purpose whatsoever, does not come easily to me, almost seems wrong somehow. So even as I say to you that perhaps we do not need to concern ourselves with the purpose of the Transfiguration, in the back of my head there is a voice insisting that of course we need to worry about the purpose of the Transfiguration. If not, then why bother with a sermon about it?

A rather whimsical Fred Craddock story: "As a boy I spent pleasant summer evenings gathering fallen stars. My brothers and I would go into a field near our house, climb up on tree stumps, and wait for stars to fall. From these perches we could see exactly where they fell and it was not uncommon to have our pockets filled within an hour. Sometimes we would sneak from the back porch with Grandma's clothes basket and harvest the remaining stars still flickering on the ground. And sometimes, dragging the heavy basket home left us too tired to empty it. 'We will do it in the morning,' we would say, but in the morning Grandma was already fussing about a residue of gray ashes in her clothes basket. (everyone knows you cannot save stars over until the next night.) We denied charges of having kindled a fire in her basket and snickered off to play, protected from punishment by the mystery.

“During her last illness, Grandma called me to her bed and told me, almost secretively, that she knew what we had been doing with her laundry basket all those years. My guilty silence was broken by her instruction for me to bring to her a package wrapped in newspaper from the bottom of the old chest. I obeyed and then waited the eternity it took for her arthritic fingers to open the bundle. ‘Oh, it’s gone,’ she said, showing me where it had been. In the bottom of the package was a little residue of gray ashes. ‘You too, Grandma?’ I said.

Craddock’s fanciful story reminds me of some words from Sam Keen: “I suspect we are all recipients of cosmic love notes. Messages, omens, voices, and revelations are all part of each day’s events. If only we knew how to listen, to read the signs. Our everyday life isn’t everyday. The surface of what we see and hear isn’t all there is. When you laugh, when you cry, when you feel something happening inside, open yourself to the possibilities. The potential of the life we have been given is breathtaking.” You just never when you might be walking along, look down, and there it is...a glimmering fallen star.

And maybe at its heart, that’s what the Transfiguration truly is – a glimmering moment, a cosmic love note, something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends explanation or full human understanding, something that for just a moment invites us to be lost in that “love divine all loves excelling, lost in wonder, love and praise.”

A story is told of a woman and her young son trying to squeeze into a New York subway train during rush hour. Surrounded by a horde of pushing and shoving people, slowly moving toward the train, the boy looked up at his mother and asked, “Are we in line?” She answered, “Line? There is no line. Son, this isn’t school. This is life!”

And we know that. We know all too well that life is often tough and crowded and difficult. And ours is a faith, a God, who does not turn away from the trouble and pain and difficulties of life. And yet, maybe the Transfiguration, maybe our time together in worship, is a time when we are called away, at least for a few moments, from the grind of our everyday concerns; a time when we are called away and invited to pick up a fallen star, which is to say to lay aside our oh-so-serious attempts to find meaning and purpose and simply enjoy a moment, a purposeless moment, with a wondrous, mysterious God. So much of our life is a matter of our plans, our programs and our love for the orderly and predictable – not a bad description of me. But could it be that our faith, our Lord, also invites us into a great experience of spontaneity, surprise and adventure?

Back to Moses: His life changed one day while he was tending his father-in-law’s sheep. According to the storyteller, Moses had led his flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God, when an angel of God appeared to him in a burning bush. But the bush was not in right in front of him. It must have been off to the side, not completely visible, because when Moses saw it he said, “I must turn aside and see why this bush is burning yet not burned up.” The bush required Moses to take a time out, to leave his planned path, to set aside his defined purpose and intention, and open himself to mystery. Of course, he could have said, “Isn’t that interesting, but I have to get these sheep back home. I don’t have time for such foolishness.”

But what made him Moses was his willingness to turn aside. Wherever else he was supposed to be going and whatever else he was supposed to be doing, he decided it could all wait. He parked the sheep and went off the beaten path to take a closer look at this marvelous sight. And when he did, the storyteller tells us, God noticed. And nothing was ever the same again.

I’m not really sure what we accomplish here each Sunday. But it occurs to me that perhaps accomplishment and purpose are not what we are all about. Maybe we are about unexplainable toys, falling stars, and burning bushes. Because you just never know when, on some ordinary Sunday, God might decide to stroll down the center aisle and sit right next to you.