

## Year B Feast of the Transfiguration

St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Denver  
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### **2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9**

There are people who speak truth with searing precision into narrative of our lives. One such person for a number of years in my life was Dr. Yoram Kauffman, a Jungian analyst whom I came to know through my participation in the Assisi Conferences.

When I entered that group, I had the amazing good fortune of being assigned to Dr. Kauffman for my phone supervision. My work with him continued for a number of years beyond that program.

Dr. Kauffman had a rare gift in the arena of dream translation and the translation of images and their meaning in one's life and in history. He worked from an approach within Jungian psychology that asserted images have a transpersonal, trans-historical objective meaning. Hence, he used the term "translating" images in dreams and waking life rather than "interpreting" them.

It is not an exaggeration for me to say that Dr. Kauffman saved me more than once at critical junctures when wisdom was required in my early adult life. Saved me from logic born of ego driven needs—to placate, to flinch from truth, to preserve a certain image of myself or of others at the cost of someone's safety or even, possibly, their life.

His wisdom was instrumental in helping me, and ultimately Nathan, decide to pick up and move here without jobs or prospects, really, for the sake of the needs we saw in our older son.

His wisdom was instrumental in helping me find the fortitude to end close personal relationships that were truly threatening to one of our sons, even though to do so required courage and resulted in great pain.

His wisdom changed the course of my life more than once.

I worked with him by phone twice a month over a period of years. Those calls were at the heart of my life, at the heart of my soul's journey.

One day, as we were finishing a powerful call that had involved a significant dream translation, Dr. Kauffman said, "I need to tell you something. I must end my work with you. Today will be our last session."

I felt kicked in the stomach. Knocked to the ground. I could not find any words except, “what?” He repeated what he had said. “What have I done wrong?” I asked. “Nothing,” he said. “This is not about you.”

“Why, then?” I asked. “I simply must end our work.” “It’s so abrupt,” I said. “I don’t understand.” “I know,” he said. “I’m very sorry. I simply must.”

I could spend the rest of the morning talking about endings—how to do them well. How I experienced abandonment that day. How hard it was to recover from this devastating call.

In time I learned, not from Dr. Kauffman, but from others in the Assisi community, that he was very ill. He died within a year after we ended those calls.

It was like him, completely consistent with his understanding of proper boundaries in his work, not to share even a summary of his reasons for ending the work.

But for me, it was like falling off a cliff. It’s still difficult to think about, even now.

We did exchange one brief written communication after that. I was able to thank him for his profound impact on my life. In his letter, he gave me a blessing, in his own way, of my life and path. But that was it. He was gone.

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration. On this day, we typically focus our attention on the experience Peter, James, and John had of seeing Jesus and the prophets dazzling with the light of God. The Jews called this the *Tabor light*, or the *shekhinah*. A light that revealed God’s glory in someone.

And sometimes, too, we focus Jesus’ response to Peter when he wanted to build the booths. We emphasize the fact that Jesus got them off that mountain and back to ministry in the world in a hurry.

Both aspects of the story warrant our attention.

But there are stories behind the Transfiguration that reveal another layer of meaning. I’d like to look at that extra layer today, because I suspect we need to see this often overlooked aspect of the story in order to appreciate the more obvious messages this gospel offers us.

Two stories prefigure today’s gospel: the story of Moses’ death, and the story of Elijah’s death, the two prophets who appear on the mountain top.

Why are these two figures the ones who appear? One might argue that Elijah would have been better paired with Enoch, since both of them ascended from the earth

without the un-pleasantries of death. Or one could argue Moses and David should have been paired, two shepherds who delivered their people.

There is one connection between Moses and Elijah that drives the entire story of the Transfiguration. Both are mentors. Moses to Joshua, Elijah to Elisha. And both men die before they complete their destinies.

The first chapter of Joshua begins with Joshua and the people bereft, stopped in their tracks over the loss of their leader. As the book opens, God says to Joshua, "Moses my servant is dead. Get going. Cross this Jordan River, you and all the people". (The Message, from Joshua 1)

Likewise, on the day Elijah dies, Elisha is so grief stricken that he cannot bear even to hear others speak of Elijah's impending death. When they do, he retorts, "Keep Silent!" And when Elijah finally dies, Elisha rips his clothes in shreds. But then, he takes up Elijah's mantle, strikes the water, and crosses over the Jordan. Like Joshua, he gets moving.

Peter, James, and John do not realize it on the mount of transfiguration, but they are Joshua and Elisha. While Peter's attention is on preserving the moment, the very figures appearing before him signal what will soon happen. Jesus will die. And they will need to get up, get going, pick up his mantle, and cross the Jordan.

And no matter how much Jesus tries to prepare them, Peter, James, and John will not be ready to lose him when the time comes. Neither before his death nor the second time, after his resurrection.

They were no more ready than Joshua and Elisha. No more ready than I was for Dr. Kauffman's farewell.

Beneath the obvious themes in the story of the Transfiguration lies a message about the importance of mentoring relationships to the work of God.

The word *mentor* comes from Homer. Mentor was the character in the Odyssey who guided Odysseus' son, Telemachus during the search for his father. Mentor was actually the goddess of wisdom, Athena, in a hidden form. Mentors, then, are the ones who give us wisdom to guide us in fulfilling our destinies. Sometimes, that wisdom comes like a kick in the pants.

I've never really thought much about it until this year's reading of the text, but I believe the Transfiguration is a story about coming into our own. Coming into our own power to lead, to transform this world. To be the heroes we need. It's a passing of the torch story.

That's why Moses and Elijah appear. You could not find two more iconic figures to reflect the importance of picking up one's mantle, of receiving the torch from one's mentors. Peter, James, and John would soon need to lead in ways they'd not yet imagined. Their turn was coming.

This past year, we lost a lot of mentors. Nelson Mandela, Maya Angelou, Vincent Harding, and Pete Seeger to name a few. When he preached here recently, Pastor Anthony Grimes reminded us of this and spoke of our mentors in the work of justice standing at the gates, holding forth, keeping evil back.

When our mentors die, we have a choice. We can lament and let their work end. Or we can get up, pick up their mantle, and get going.

This week, once again, we must mourn senseless deaths in our land. Three young Muslims, Deah Shaddy Barakat, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha were killed in the parking lot where they lived. Regardless of whether these were hate crimes or acts of insanity or rage, the violence remains.

And when we are willing to be silent about the devaluing of any human lives, we participate in perpetuating a cultural milieu that encourages or at least becomes desensitized to such acts.

We have been mentored well here at St. Thomas for generations. We know what courage looks like. We've had giants right here, showing us the way. And now, just like in their day, we have work to do to build the society we want generations after us to inherit. This work is not new, but our part requires new fire, new light.

We must shine like those who have gone before us. We must be transfigured. Given to the same passion that illumined the lives of our mentors. Mentors who were prophets, willing to defy oppression. Willing to say and do risky things to restore God's covenant of loving kindness with all his children. Willing to be unpopular, outspoken, edgy. Because they were *tired* of oppression. Because they were unwilling to let one more generation of beautiful children suffer.

We must pick up the mantle of their wisdom, put it on, and get moving.

In these times of complacency and silence, we can cry justice. In these times of division and bitterness, we can anoint with the balm of Gilead and feed with the bread of life. In these times of weariness and fear, we can cross over and lead a new generation to the promised land.

Don't let the work end with your mentors. Pick up their mantle.

You *are* Joshua. You *are* Elisha.

Get up. Get moving. Cross the Jordan.

Shine.