



**A Sermon from Dr. Jody Seymour, Senior Pastor
Davidson United Methodist Church
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The Sermon Text: Luke 9:28-36

The People Who Help Us Change

“I know this is a dream except you two are here with me and you seem quite awake. Are those two who I think they are? What in the world is going on here? Moses and Elijah are figures from the distant past and there’s Jesus talking to them like he’s known them for years and this is some kind of family reunion.

No John, I have not been staring at the sun too long. You see the same thing I do you just don’t anymore know what to do with it than I do. Why does he need Moses and Elijah all of a sudden and what are they...I mean are they angels or something?

Hey, you remember the story of when Jacob encountered the angel he built a kind of shrine with stones. Maybe this is some kind of test for us and we’re supposed to, you know, do something. I think I’ll ask him if he wants us to build something to commemorate this...this..whatever this is.”

So goes the conversation that perhaps Peter had with James and John that day. We’ve just heard the story of what is known as the Transfiguration. This rather strange event or vision always comes the Sunday before we start the journey of Lent on Ash Wednesday. It seems that every year Jesus has a sort of small group event.

You will be hearing from your church in the days ahead about an effort to ask and offer you the chance to participate in what I call faith formation groups. I know what I hope you sense and that is you simply cannot get all you need for your faith from this one hour weekly worship event.

So today I present you with the idea that even Jesus needed a small group. Who helps you grow and change? Jesus pulls together some of his friends both old and new. He asks Peter, James, and John to come up on the mountain with him and he invites some faith heroes from the past, Moses and Elijah, to join him.

Was Jesus seeking encouragement, knowledge, or perhaps he just needed to be with some people that he knew were kindred spirits so he could prepare for the journey to Jerusalem where he would face some real challenges? Jesus needed a small group so I humbly suggest that you and I might need a little help too if we want to take the journey of faith.

The scene reminds me of the 1986 song by the group Timbuk 3:

I got a crazy teacher, he wears dark glasses
Things are going great, and they’re only getting better



I'm doing alright getting good grades
The future's so bright I gotta wear shades

Peter, James, and John are by this time in their journey with Jesus thinking that though Jesus at times may appear to be a kind of “crazy teacher” things are in fact going great up to this point. The crowds are growing, the word is spreading that this guy may in fact be the long awaited deliverer, and well...who seem to be the inner circle picked to lead the coming kingdom...none other than Peter, James, and John. Whoa, things are going great and they seem to be making the “grade” when it comes to their “teacher.”

And now there's this light show of sorts with Jesus shinning as bright as the sun and a voice comes over the PA system, “Hey this IS my chosen one...listen up.” Hey man, the future's so bright they “gotta wear shades.”

What they do not know is that the future is going to soon have storm clouds on the horizon and these three disciples will have to take off their dark glasses only to see the looming shadow of a cross. They too are going to need a small group to help them sort all this out.

No one knows what really happened on that mountain of Transfiguration. This scene obviously does not match up to our modern day mind where people who have been dead for many years come prancing back and a figure lights up like he swallowed a “light-saber” or something.

Ready for some down and dirty bible study? When we hear a story like this in the bible we are not supposed to ask the modern day question that comes quickly: “What happened and how? Did Jesus get zapped by lightning or something? What made his clothes shine so bright? And how did Moses and Elijah show up? Were they visions, or holograms or something?”

The question for us now is not so much the scientific materialistic one of “what happened,” but “why it happened and what it means?” In case you are wondering I am not planning on doing my rock-star light show imitation and appear to “light up,” and I'm not going to hold up life size posters of Elijah, Moses, and Jesus. What I do want to hold up is the meaning of this scene that shines so bright that we “gotta wear shades.”

This light show from long ago tells us who Jesus is and gets us ready to accept his invitation to follow him. The figures from the past are angel-like ones that tell us that he is connected to an old faith story. I'm not sure what the conversation was between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah but knowing what Jesus is going to face as he goes to Jerusalem, since you and I know the end of the story, I imagine that Jesus could use some encouraging words from these famous people.

The voice comes from heaven and clearly states that the wait is over and that though people are going to be surprised and often disappointed, this man with the light shining on his face is



“my child, my chosen and we need to listen to him” even though at times his words will challenge us and offer us a new way of life.

Though those three disciples may think this is quite a show and they want to stay up on the mountain and continue their mountain top experience Jesus will lead them down into the valley where the demons wait and the people are hurting. It is not only Jesus that needs the transforming, the disciples will soon learn that they too are going to need not to sign a transaction or some agreement, they will need transformation too.

So in case you miss what I’m trying to say, I’ll take off the dark glasses and make it clear. If we want to follow Jesus we’re going to need some help. We will need to do this together, we will need friends or heroes from the past, and we’ll need to be willing to be transformed and not just join something.

So if we need some help and encouragement for this journey of faith, who is going to help you in this needed transformation? I heard again this week the song “I Know there are Angels Among Us.” The usual image of angels is one of winged figures who look very other-worldly. If I asked you this morning how many of you have ever seen an angel I don’t think I would get many responses.

But that is because of our limited view of what angels are. The word in the bible is “angeloi” in Greek and “malak” in Hebrew. The simple translation is “messenger.” In Celtic spirituality the term “thin places” is used to help us understand that there are places in our lives where if we pay attention there can be thin places where the other dimension that we call eternity can be seen and felt. Perhaps that day on the mountain Peter, James, and John experienced one of those thin places where they witness a quick glimpse of the beyond...a brief picture of angels who come to help Jesus...because he is going to need some help.

There is but a thin line between this world and the next. Eternity is not beyond the farthest galaxy. It is not just the poet who knows that “eternity is in our grasp.” There are thin places where we can experience the reality that before we ever get to angels we are spiritual beings.

This week I was reminded that since we are spiritual beings we have the capacity to go beyond what we call the “self” into the capacity that we call “soul” because we do not know what other word to use for it. The self sees fear but the soul can see the connection that we have to God. The self sees scarcity but the soul sees every person as a unique expression of God.

Angels help us embrace the world fearlessly rather than trying to escape the world. So much of the religion we hear these days offers a kind of escape from the world. Jesus is not taken up from the mountain that day he talks with his angel-like friends who help him go back down to the valley to transform people and the world.



Do you remember the story of Jacob's ladder when Jacob sees a ladder come down from heaven and angels ascending and descending? In the original Hebrew the translation allows for that ladder to begin not outside of Jacob but in his mind. The angles come from him and then come back to him.

Later when Jacob ends up wrestling with an angel two things happen to him. His hip is thrown out of joint so that his wound makes him walk slower. He must now pay attention to life. He cannot run past people or needs. The second thing that happens to Jacob is that he is transformed as witnessed by his name being changed from Jacob to Israel, which means one who struggles with God and remains.(taken from "Why Angels Have Wings"/Rami Shapiro/Spirituality and Health/Jan-Feb 2010 pp.51-52)

In our world of "tea parties" and talking heads screaming insults at each other we need some angels to remind us that the fear we are always projecting on "the other" in fact starts within us. We need some transformation to help us "walk" a different way where we pay attention to needs and people.


Who are your angels? Who helps you change? In my past the angel-like voice of Grandma Hattie still reminds me "that some knowledge is to high you cannot attain it." She was the one who boldly told me that I would simply not be able to figure it all out when it comes to God and faith.

It was my own mother who died 22 years ago but who whispers to me through one of those thin places as I ask my questions of faith, "Let's get something straight boy, when I see Jesus face to face he's got a lot to account for." Do you know that when I have to stand with you in those moments of your suffering and when you ask me the questions that seem to have no answers about why children are sick and why young mothers have cancer...that I hear my mother and she holds on to me..."Stand with them in the questions young man...God is in the questions...God is bigger than our religion."

Jesus needed some angels it seems but before you dismiss this as pictures in a book of winged creatures that you are petty sure you will never see floating over your desk at work at 3:00 in the afternoon unless you've taken some little green pills; let me remind you that as I read this week angels have wings only because we need them to come to us. Angels are in reality messengers who encourage us and there are angels among us.

Who are your angels? Who helps transform you? We need messengers who help us along the road. We are not supposed to do it alone. Even Jesus knows that. He takes some of his group up on that mountain and he calls upon voices from the past to help him. The story of the transfiguration is not some bizarre light show from long ago where we need shades to behold it. It is rather our story telling us that we too need people along the way to help us first be transformed and then to be able to go help God transform the world.

In this moment I ask you to ponder who have been your angels from the past? Who has helped shaped you and your faith? Well, then step up on the mountain of transfiguration



today and thank God for your angels. And remember there are those thin places where they can still speak to you, hold on to you, encourage you.

And now we have our journey ahead. How will you seek the help you need for that journey. We again face Lent where Jesus will take us to places of denial and death. It is a hard journey but it is a journey he took not just for himself but for us. Jesus took the journey so that we would never be alone in our moments of questioning. He ends up in a barrowed grave because each of us will too...but even there we will not be alone.

God today again says to us, "This is the one, my child...listen to him." God comes to be with us in Christ but if we are going to follow him we will need some help...who has helped you? Who will help you...and believe it or not you and I can actually be an angel to someone..if we will allow God to use us...pay attention to the thin places...walk slowly and do not run on this journey of faith...your name is Israel if you dare to follow the one who himself needed a few angels along the way....

(I ended this sermon by playing the last part of "Angels Among Us" sung by Ed Kilbourne)