



I love a good story,
whether it is a book or a movie;
we all love being captivated by a well-executed narrative.
And in any good story, we
—consciously or unconsciously—
will identify with the story's characters.
You know you've got a good book on your nightstand
when you think about the characters
and what they are doing
even when you aren't reading the book.
A good story is complex, and rich
—when I read, *Where the Crawdads Sing*,
I was captivated by the story,
surprised by the outcome
and forgot I don't live on the coast.

We want to be like the heroes in our stories.
Even if we don't face the situations they do,
we hope we'd do
the heroic things they do
that make us so enamored with them.
I hope I would have the bravery
of Frodo Baggins or Samwise Gambage
in the *Lord of the Rings*;
to travel away from all I know,
encounter numerous dangers,
be tempted by power
and still do the right thing.

¹ Sermon based off Alyce McKenzie's, *Finding Ourselves in the Story: A Reflection on Transfiguration Sunday*, Feb. 2011, <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/02/finding-ourselves-in-the-story-alyce-mckenzie-02-25-2011.aspx?p=2>

Don't we hope
we would be like George Bailey
and have a divine encounter
that renewed our sense of goodness in life
and the world?

Years ago, I went to a movie
and walked out
before the film was done.
Have you ever done that?
This movie had John Travolta in it,
and I can't even tell you
what the movie was!
I don't remember what the story line was about,
or even who I went to the movies with.
I just remember that it is the only movie
I've ever walked out on,
and it was because I couldn't connect with the story.
I couldn't relate to any of the characters;
I couldn't see myself in them
and so, after 45 minutes
I got up and left.

Sometimes the story of the transfiguration,
makes me feel that way too.
What do you think?
We don't always connect with it
—I for one don't understand it.
I want to ask what does this story mean?



One of my seminary professors says
the transfiguration
is a story that we dare not explain

...but rather we should see it
as an invitation as God's people
to make the journey up the mountain
to see Christ glorified—
in order to walk back down into the world
and join Christ in his suffering mission of
redemption.²

Clearly.

It is a story of significance but mystery.
Dead people appear.
Something happens to Jesus,
his clothing, his body.
Peter does, what Peter always does
—says something odd and strange.
It is a story of the miraculous and the ordinary.

On minute Jesus is asking his closest disciples
to come on an afternoon hike with him.
And the next, the booming voice of the Almighty
throws the terrified men right to the ground.

So, if we are supposed to
suspend the need to explain the story
and instead let the story be just that,
not something we try and make sense of
but rather a way for us to encounter Christ
as the one who is glorified and saves
but also, as the one who suffers
—then I'm still left wondering
where are we to connect in the story?

Let's map out who's here.

First is Jesus
—um probably not going to identify with him
...obviously he's Jesus.

² Stanley P. Saunders, Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God's Presence (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2010 pg.169)

Then there's three of Jesus's closest disciples,
the friends he trusts enough
to bring them with him:

Peter, James and John.

Next are arguably two of the most famous prophets
of ancient Israel, Moses and Elijah.

And finally, the talking cloud.

I suppose we ought to start
with the most human of them all,
Peter.



Poor ole bumbling Peter.

Peter, who seems to always say
the wrong thing.

He's clearly one of Jesus's favorites though;
he's one of the first

to follow this rabbi from Galilee

—he's passionate and eager,
bold and brash.

Peter walks on water;

Peter's sick mother-in-law is healed from a fever;

and Peter, the rock,

the one Jesus declares

he will build the church on,

Peter gives the surest declaration in the New Testament,

“You are the Messiah,
the Son of the living God.”

But there's also Peter

the one who denies knowing Jesus;

Peter, who with the other disciples,

wants to send the children away;

Peter who goes on another hike with Jesus
and can't stay awake;
Peter who in one breath gives Jesus
the strongest, surest affirmation
and in the next breath
receives Jesus's strongest rebuke
"Get behind me Satan!
You are a stumbling block for me;
for you are setting your mind
not on divine things
but on human things." (Matt. 16:23)

Are we Peter?

Hot one minute and cold the next?
Do we feel close to God
and then all the sudden we don't?
We've said the exact right thing
and said the exact wrong thing.
And when we stumble into something holy,
are we fumbling for words
not sure what to say or do?
Peter who shined one minute and failed the next.
Maybe we can identify with Peter.



What about Moses?

Do we see ourselves in Moses?
Moses who was a great leader,
but started out as a humble herdsman.
Did you start out on the bottom
and through what might seem
like being at the right place at the right time,
manage to get to the top?
Have you been reluctantly thrust into the spotlight

and didn't always relish all that attention?
Does your temper run hot?
Can you see yourself
 throwing down those stone tablets
 after the people made a golden calf?
 After all you'd done for them!
Moses, who led these stiff-necked people
 in the desert for 40 years,
 but because he threw a tantrum
 never made it to the Promised Land.

You know Moses talked to God
 and his face shone so brightly
 he had to wear something
 to cover himself so people could look at him.
 He encountered the Almighty
 and he wasn't the same after that.
 Can you relate?
 Have you seen truth
 and now you can't unsee it?
 Is your life different now
 and your family and friends don't understand?

But you know what else?
Moses was a great leader
 but got tired
 of the constant bickering and whining
 of God's people.
Moses was a leader,
 but a leader with flaws.
A leader who didn't speak well in front of others.

 A leader who never wanted
 to be a leader in the first place.
You remember how Moses
made excuses to God, right?
Have you ever made excuses to God?
 Reasoned out why you really aren't
 the right person to do the right thing?

Moses knew what it was like
to feel the glory of God
and the agony of serving God.
Maybe we can see ourselves a little bit in Moses.³



Then there's Elijah.
While Moses
is the Old Testament savior,
Elijah is the gold standard of prophets.
Elijah was such a great prophet
that he didn't die,
he was taken to be with God
on a chariot of fiery horses.
Somehow that is not in my Act of Love booklet.
He was a doosey of a prophet.
He spoke out against
one of the worst rulers in Israel,
King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.
He challenged their false prophets
to a prophet duel.
Brought them all out on the mountain
and let them do their dances and chanting
—he mocked them telling them
they needed to be louder,
that maybe Baal just didn't hear them.
Then he had jugs of water poured on to an altar
(during a drought!)
and called fire down from heaven.

³ Alyce McKenzie, Finding Ourselves in the Story: A Reflection on Transfiguration Sunday Feb. 2011,
<https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/02/finding-ourselves-in-the-story-alyce-mckenzie-02-25-2011.aspx?p=2>

When the fire destroyed the altar
and the false prophets,
Elijah had to run for his life.
He ran to a mountain,
remember that?
It's like he forgot
how powerful God was.
Has that ever happened to you?
Something incredible happens in your life,
and you give thanks to God
—only in that next minute
you forget and let fear overtake you?

Elijah ran scared several times.
He hid under a broom tree once
and begged God for the end to come.
Have you felt that way?
Told God, alright I'm done with all this
—it is more than I bargained for.
Elijah knew the wonder of hearing God's promises
and the suffering of following God's ways.
Maybe we can see ourselves in Elijah.



Matthew says they were talking to Jesus.
Do you wonder what they were talking about?
Do you think it was sort of like that game you play
where you ask, if you could have dinner
with two people dead or alive,
who would it be?
Do you suppose these were Jesus's two people?

Maybe Moses offered some encouragement
that even though it seems like Jerusalem

might be the end,
that God always comes through?

Maybe he was telling Jesus,
*listen those Egyptians were racing down our backsides
and there was the sea right in front of us.
I thought for sure that I had made it all up
—you know, maybe I'd been wrong
and I didn't hear a voice
tell me, **I am who I am**
and maybe I didn't see
that bush that was on fire
but wasn't burning.
Maybe I'm crazy.
Maybe I'm wrong about God
and brought all these people to their death.*

Maybe Moses reassured Jesus,
*But God made it happen.
None of that was easy.
But you can do this.
No matter what happens,
I know God is with you.*

Maybe Elijah said to him,
*you have the truth with you.
That's what matters.
I hid in cave for (Pete's sake)
and I thought
maybe it was my imagination too.
Maybe I imagined seeing the mountains break
and the earth shake and quake
and the fires roar...
Maybe I didn't heard God call to me
in the sound of silence.
But God was there,
guiding me all along.
You are doing the right thing,
Elijah tells Jesus,*

*even when you feel like you are the lone one
who knows what is right,
you've got to do it,
I promise it won't be easy,
and it will be scary,
but I know God is with you.*

Matthew says Jesus
was transfigured before them
—I don't know exactly what that means.
No one does.
But what we do know is that as he is changed,
right then and right there
from teacher to savior.

Maybe Moses and Elijah
are reminding Jesus what it is like
to see the wonder of God;
to hear the very voice of God;
to feel the promise of steadfast presence.

All three of them knew
what it was to experience the glory and the pain
of serving the Lord.

If we were there,
would we have been Peter,
who really didn't know what else to say?
Would we have been like John and James
who are so dumbfounded
they don't say a thing?!

These disciples might not seem
like they get it right here on the mountain,
but “[R]emember...all three of these men
become leaders of the early church,
and all three die painfully
for their faith in their Transfigured Lord.”⁴

⁴ ibid



This mountain top experience
must have been just what Jesus needed.
As he talks with Moses and Elijah
his clothes appear to shine with a radiance
that only comes from an encounter with the divine.

Then the cloud descends,
just like in the old days,
when the cloud of God
would come down and dwell on the tabernacle.
And the heavenly voice speaks.

In Matthew, the divine speaks two times.
The first is at Jesus's baptism,
his identity is confirmed,
"This is my Son, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased."
And this is the second time
the voice from heaven speaks and says,
"This is my Son, the Beloved;
with him I am well pleased;
listen to him!"

Both confirm Jesus's identity;
both remind Jesus who he is in God's story.

Here's what I think is so wonderful
about the transfiguration.
We aren't going to usually pick Jesus
as the one we identify
within this story.

Yet, this shows Jesus's humanity

and his divinity on full display.
Luke's version of the transfiguration story
tells us is that Jesus goes up on the mountain
to get away and pray.

What kind of God
needs to get away from it all
and pray?

One that is fully human.
One that felt the burden of truth
and doing the right thing
and knew the threat of death
by going up against the greatest of deadly powers.

What kind of God needs to go up to a high mountain?

The kind of Lord who felt every disease and pain
and every bit of brokenness
that anyone ever brought to him.

The kind of Lord who needed the reassurance
and promise of those who walked before him
that he is the one to bring the new Exodus,
the new way of salvation for God's people.

We aren't called to bring the new Exodus
but we know what it is
to be tired and worn down, don't we?
We know what it is
to need to step away,
to retreat to the mountains, (ha)
and to clear away the clatter and business
in order to hear from and see God.

What we have is a story about our God
who so loved the world
that he came to be one of us.
To put on display the divine glory
and not skip the suffering of humanity.
To anguish in the moments

before his arrest
and cry out in death
—only to overwhelm and overturn it all
and say to us what he said
to Peter, James and John on the mountain,
“do not be afraid.”

So, don't try to explain
what you think you see here.
And don't try to explain
what you think you've heard.
This story doesn't need our explanations.

This is a good story;
an invitation to connect,
to identify and to trust
that this God we serve
knows about suffering
and knows about glory.
This is the son,
the beloved,
listen to him.