

---

## ***FACING CHANGE***

MARK 9:2-10

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2024

BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

---

Some people don't like change. They do the same thing every morning at home. Same coffee. Same cup. Same chair. Same time. At church, we see a similar dynamic every Sunday: Same pew, same pew neighbors, same parking spot, same entry door, same moment you daydream or fall asleep during a sermon. But don't hold your breath—we still haven't been able to end the service at the same time each week. My point is that we are often creatures of habit and routine.

But think about all of the changes we've gone through because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Things are not the same. We probably won't ever fully realize how much we've been changed because of it. We never really wore masks in masses before but now, you see more cautionary mask-wearing and hand-sanitizing. Our habits of participation or gathering in groups have changed. At many workplaces, remote work is an option now and for some organizations it's totally remote. You can walk through the hallways of many buildings on campus and it's different than before. Much quieter because everyone isn't in person every day. Our way of life has changed. And these shifts are on top of the typical life changes—relationship changes, employment changes, health changes, address changes. We may be creatures of habit, but we can't stop change.

And what I realize is that Jesus' favorite disciples (I call them the three stooges)—Peter, James and John, who seem to always be his chosen inner circle—are the only ones to experience the transfiguration of Jesus. Only three of them see Jesus transform before their eyes. Only three of them see him change. Jesus took them with him to go up a mountain and left the crowd and the rest of the disciples behind. The majority do not go or are not asked to go, so *most* of the followers of Jesus don't see him transfigured. And maybe this tells us that only a few can truly handle change. Perhaps change is not something most of us enjoy.

In this story, *many* people, including most of the twelve disciples, don't see the change in Jesus and thus miss the dazzle. They will not know immediately about his transformation either as Jesus tells Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone about what they saw. This means that those not on the mountain still think Jesus is the same person who went up the mountain, but he changed, and they missed it. When they see him again, they think he's still the same person pre-mountain climb. It happens to us, too, when we think a friend is the same person after so many years of not seeing them, the same person you grew up with in your small town or the same person from your college days. But no one stays the same even a year later because people are always changing. And if you're not changing, then you're not transforming. Even if we are uncomfortable with it, change is the only constant. It is a part of life, a part of the church, a part of theological education.

We are seeing tremendous change in theological education. The proliferation of online education and degrees. Hybrid, flexible educational models. Synchronous. Asynchronous. Concerns about enrollment numbers and the future of church leadership. Some schools have lots of money to offer, but they still can't attract the interest. Some seminaries or divinity schools have closed or merged with other institutions. It is not like it was when I went to seminary and yes, I feel old even saying that. Things have changed just like seasons do.

But we should be aware that change is a part of Jesus. Novelist Octavia Butler wrote "God is change." Jesus changes, transfigures or transforms. He reveals a mystical metamorphosis right before their eyes to show them that change, that is, transformation, is a part of God's redemptive story. Some may be hesitant about change, but it is even in God's DNA in Christ. And changing is not a horror or something to fear because after Jesus is transfigured, the voice from a cloud calls him beloved. Change receives a divine blessing, the imprimatur of God. There's an affirmation of love for the one who's changed. So changing is not a bad thing; Jesus reveals it could be a God thing.

The transfiguration shows that Jesus refuses to be a status quo Savior. God baptizes change in Jesus reminding us that change is a part of the Christian life because it is a part of the life of Christ.

How do you respond to change when you see it or experience it? *Some do embrace it.* “Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” The transfiguration seems to be good for Peter while at the same time he wants to make dwellings for them. He accepts the change but on his terms. He wants to create a structure to hold on to what he sees as long as possible; seemingly he doesn’t want any more change. It may appear that he even wants to domesticate Jesus to put some boundaries around his future, around any more potential change. One transfiguration is enough for him. ‘I’ll put you in a box, oh I mean a dwelling, Jesus.’

We learn, however, that Peter might have said this because he didn’t know what to say since they were terrified. *Some respond to change in fear and misunderstanding.* Jesus transfigures but then the voice from the cloud says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” They not only fear what they see but what they hear. And on top of this, Jesus tells them don’t tell anyone. You can’t blame them. It doesn’t all make sense yet that’s often how God works in his ministry of transformation. And because of Jesus’ change, we may be unsure of our steps because this wasn’t the Jesus we signed up to follow.

And to be sure, *some don’t like change at all.* The transfiguration scene happens in the context of the predictions of Jesus’ suffering and death. Some want to kill change or stop it, even if that means assassinating presidents or civil rights leaders or the Christ. They want to prevent change because they like it as it has always been and most certainly, they don’t want God to transform or at least their image of God, the face of God they’ve always known. But Jesus will change right before our eyes, and this will be hard for some because we like him just the way we always saw him on that church handheld fan.

Regardless of our responses to change, change can be quick or slow. Very slow. BBC reported just this past Monday about the longest and slowest music composition in existence. The breaking news was that this piece changed a chord for the first time in two years as crowds gathered at a church in Germany. It was the experimental musical piece called “As Slow as Possible” by avant-garde composer John Cage. And get this, the piece began in 2001. It is being played on a specially built mechanical organ and is not set to finish playing until the year 2640, 616 years away. This composition has had 16 chord changes thus far. And though the title gave clear instructions to play the piece as slow as possible there was never an exact tempo named. The next scheduled musical change will be on August 5, 2026. Regardless of the time it takes to change, to transfigure, it will happen.

Change is a part of the Christian life because change is a part of the life of Christ. Because Jesus changed, we will be changed. His transfiguration is a promise of our transformation. He transforms because he is the transformer and he’s definitely more than meets the eye. The change that happens in us through him receives a divine blessing and a word of love. So when change happens, no matter what, you’re still loved, beloved, because we’ve encountered the change agent, Jesus, the one who in so many stories in the gospel of Mark heals people. He changes their lives forever. He transforms, not malforms. I can hear many of the healed, singing the song of gospel artist Tramaine Hawkins: “A change, a change has come over me/He changed my life and now I’m free.... A wonderful change has come over me.”

All throughout the scriptures, if we listen, we will hear ‘Change!’ “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory...” (2 Cor. 3:18). If we listen, we will hear, ‘Change!’ “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” (1 Cor 15:52) Change!

We have been changed, are changing, and will be changed. Jesus shows us what it means to be like him—it is to be changed or to be transformed. Jesus is about the business of change and change is the love language of God. What else could explain the changes God makes to go from divinity to humanity in the Incarnation or to rise from death to life in the resurrection, or to leave earth to glory in the ascension? It’s all change because of love!

Jesus is a change agent of life-giving love. His transfiguration is a preview of the resurrection. His transfiguration means our resurrection.

*Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in Heav'n we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

I know some of you don't like change. Good luck with that. Because when you meet Jesus, on a high mountain or in a low valley, just know that the musical prophet Sam Cooke was right—"a change is gonna come."