

# Deeper Relationship

Pastor Chuck Harris

February 27, 2022

---

Welcome to those of you who are with us online this morning, or here in the sanctuary. It is good to be together again. Today is all about transformative experiences. Think about that for a second. Just go inside yourself—your memory, your body—and remember a time in your own life when an experience that you had changed you. Maybe you didn't realize it at the time. Only when you look back—or maybe there in the moment—you caught a glimpse of what you were now becoming.

Most people don't know this, but when I was in eighth grade, I was the quarterback of our junior high football team. Now I don't look it..(that laugh was a little too loud back there!)... I don't look it. I don't. I tell you even back then, I didn't look it; I had never done anything like that before. I only had two years of football, and that was seventh and eighth grade. I was very spindly and—probably to all other people—looked malnourished. I didn't have a lot of athletic ability, but I could run. And I learned that the offensive line we had in the eighth grade was such that I spent most of the time as quarterback running.

When the coach came up to me and said, “*You're going to be our quarterback this year,*” little did I know what was going to be in store for me. I had an inkling that the only reason he picked me was I could (probably) remember the plays...that was about it. And that said something about our football team in eighth grade, that we just needed someone with a good memory

to be the quarterback. I remember the practices, you know? Jogging out onto the field and feeling that grass underneath my feet and the blue sky of autumn days on the Oregon coast. They were beautiful.

Unfortunately—whether it was in practice or in games—I spent most of my time flat on my back, looking up at the beautiful blue sky because I had failed to outrun the defensive players. They always seemed to find their way to me and knock me to the ground. But here's the point: I had not anticipated the kind of transformation, joy, and hope that came out of that moment when I completed my very first pass. It was amazing: that feeling all the hard work that had gone into fall practices, the offensive lines, to figuring stuff out. A receiver decided to turn in the right way, at the right time, to receive that football. It was amazing.

And I didn't expect this, but the whole team came and ran over to me and gave me a giant hug. It was glorious. I felt, in some weird, eighth-grade way, of now entering a different stage of teenage life. And I do have to say that, in the halls of my junior high in the days afterwards, that I think maybe even the *ladies* looked at me a little differently. Alas, it did not last long.

Most of us, in some way, shape, or form, have had a kind of life changing or life transforming experience. A lot of folks talk about it at the birth of a child, or maybe the invitation into a new job that you hadn't expected, but it opened up a whole new world for you. Maybe it's meeting that one person that you were going to be with, and you could tell it was going to change your life forever. Most of us have had some kind of life changing

experience in our lives, and they are especially powerful when God is involved. When God is part of that experience that humans have, then they find themselves transformed in amazing ways, like Moses in our first reading. We hear not of the actual experience of itself so much, but of what happened *after* the experience. Moses came down from the mountain with the two tablets, and his face shone with the glory of God. And the perception of Moses by the people changed. They feared him.

Think about that: they feared him because of his encounter with God. Moses though, being a good leader, called the people back into relationship with him. And over time—as Moses had this ongoing dialogue with God, which he would then share with the people—it began to shape God's people. It began to shape them in a way that they probably hadn't looked for or even expected, because they were on a long journey to the promised land. And as Moses was changed and communicated with them, they were changed with the giving of the 10 commandments, but far more than that. They were changed with learning to trust God's presence. Remember the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night? Somehow, in and through Moses, they were learning that God's gift to them was a constant presence through the ups and downs of their journey to the promised land.

It would be 40 years of transformation: 40 years to be made ready to enter the promised land. I think about that these last months when we are impatient for this pandemic to end. Put it in some perspective—and remember I'm as impatient as anybody—but put it in perspective. It took God 40 years to get God's people ready to enter into the promised land. A handful of

months, as terrible as they have been, opens us up to the question: what is God preparing *us* for during this time?

I am sure that over multiple decades before the pandemic, there had been enough rust, enough bad habits, enough lack of focus and mission at Messiah. Maybe now, during this time of pandemic, what God is doing is scraping the rust off us. Shining us up, giving us a clear sense of who we are and where we're going, so that as we do emerge, we can greet the moment as a gift: to ourselves and to the community around us.

Having said that, it's not only divine experiences that change us. There are some real-world experiences that we also have to take account of. I've mentioned the pandemic; we all have shared stories about how it has changed us. The economic uncertainty of these days, it's important for us to ask how it is changing us. War in Europe, conflict between Russia and the Ukraine...how is that changing us? I mean, you could even just open the curtain a little bit and imagine how—in just the span of a few short days—the lives of people in the Ukraine have been changed forever and probably not in a good way.

There are a lot of experiences in life—not good ones—that also transform or change us. Ones that create a tremendous amount of anxiety in our lives. I mean, even the disciples on the mountain top with Jesus, experienced their own frustration and anxiety, as they see the vision and begin to figure out how to contain it. *Oh, we'll make some tents. And we'll put people in it.*

Paul reassures us in Corinthians that, whether it is in the midst of anxious experiences or glorious ones, the presence of the

spirit of the Lord is with us transforming us. Paul writes, “*And all of us with unveiled basis, seeing the glory of the Lord is the reflected in the mirror are being transformed into the same image, the image of our Lord. And this comes to us because of the Lord's presence with us.*” God's gift to us is an unfailing presence that leads us into a deeper relationship with one another, and with those around us in the world. Whether it is through transformative mountaintop experiences or difficult ones, we have the promise of that gift.

Years ago, I was speaking with a young man whose father had died. In the course of our conversations, he opened up that his relationship with his father was less than perfect, and that was something that I could relate with. He had tended to his father in those last days of his father's life. In the midst of it, he kept hoping that there might be some reconciliation, some kind of transformation or epiphany that might happen between father and son to change both of them for the better before his father's passing. The young man spoke to me in my office and said, “That did not happen.” And he kept wondering, *where is God in the midst of this death, this experience?*

He talked about how the loss over the months of his father, even though the relationship was hard, was haunting him. “*It's like there's just something that's not finished here, something that isn't what it's supposed to be. I can't find what that is within myself or from God. I just want God to fix this.*”

After a few conversations, I got the courage to say something to him that I knew was going to be difficult. I said to him, “*Maybe it is not our God's job to fix things. Maybe the very thing you're*

*looking for is what is blinding you to the true light of God. Beware the God that comes to fix it all.”*

I think we see that in the transfiguration story from Luke today. There in first century Palestine—a time and place that was in deep crisis because of the Roman occupation—the Roman empire’s ability to extract resources out of its provinces and areas that it occupied: fish from the sea of Galilee, olives from the hillsides outside of Jerusalem. They’re always taking, crushing the economy of Jesus' time. And then all those crosses on the hillsides, warnings to anyone not to get out of line or you might be up there next. A time of crisis and deep anxiety...sort of reminds me of our time.

And yet, right there in the middle of this crisis, comes the story of Jesus and Peter and John and James going up the mountain. Now, I'm really not sure what a transfiguration was or is. I mean, I couldn't scientifically tell you what was going on there, but I don't think that's the point. The experience of Peter and John and James on the mountain top is similar to a lot of experiences that people have when they are in a different relationship with reality, or in an altered mental state. A state in which visions come, and sensations and perceptions of what is going on bring a sense of wholeness and healing. We have to remember that the culture of Jesus' day was much closer—in fact, *very similar*—to indigenous cultures of *our* day, where visions and dreams and healings are a daily event. Unlike our rational, scientific world, where we dismiss all that stuff.

They saw it as a gift that God would come and speak with them. That they could understand and perceive that they were being



transformed *along with Jesus*, for a purpose. To be grounded and centered in the love and grace and presence of God for the difficult journey that was ahead.

They kept silent in those days and told no one about these things because, with this transformative experience of God and Jesus' transfiguration, also came the understanding that they were about to go to Jerusalem. The road ahead was going to be tough, and it might lead to death. What they really found was that their God was *not a God that was going to fix these things*, but their God was going to be a God that accompanied them on that path.

Think about that for a second. Do you ever catch yourself saying, "*I want it to go back to normal.*" That's not the message that God gave to Peter and John and James. It was not going to go back to normal. Where it was going to go was ahead, to a time and place in which they would further be transformed in their faith, and in their life. To experience the real presence of God in their lives faithfully, day after day, no matter what hit them along the road.

It's the same for us. God, this day, whispering into each of our ears, "*Don't look for normal. Look for me. No matter what is on your daily journey, look for me.*" Normal is past. God is living in the present, bringing us into the future with a whole wide, open range of possibilities out there. Possibilities that we—as followers of God, being transformed by the spirit of the Lord—can meet and do some amazing things out there. None of it will be normal, *not a thing*. And that's scary, yes, but it's also

exciting. When we let go of normal and embrace God's presence, we can do anything.

So, as we go into this season of Lent, Ash Wednesday is coming up in just a few days. Maybe this Ash Wednesday, as you receive those ashes, maybe the death on Ash Wednesday for us this year is a death to the fantasy of normal, and a resurrection to the living presence of God leading us to the promised land.

Thanks be to God  
Amen.