

# *Overwhelmed*

from the pulpit of  
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to

him!”<sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.<sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”<sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Everywhere I turn these days I hear people talking about feeling overwhelmed. We are overwhelmed by the political rancor and deep divisions in our country; overwhelmed by the news, and the lies and the arguments over what's true and what's fake.

Some of you may have seen the article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* a week ago about the doctoral study at the University of Pennsylvania. When dozens of people were asked how the news makes them feel, the emotional responses included anxiety, certain distress, and feeling overwhelmed. Inundated with too much media a lot of folks are disconnecting from social media, the research shows, saying things like, "it's all too much... I stopped using Facebook... I was getting into too many arguments.... It was bad, bad for my mental health." <sup>1</sup>

In addition to being inundated by news on the political front, the sheer lack of winter this year with flowers budding prematurely around here, and flooding already in the South, and the iceberg the size of Atlanta, ripple the size of San Francisco, which broke off a fast retreating glacier in Antarctica just this week – all of which fuel our growing concerns about climate change. And if we have space in our minds and in our hearts to be open to the wider concerns of the world, there is even more to overwhelm us, from the coronavirus to the largest refugee crisis in history.

Many of you are reading Yossi Klein Halevi's book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, in preparation for his visit as our Community Forum speaker in April. As he considers his strong desire for peace between his Israeli ken and his Palestinian neighbors, he writes about the view from his own porch saying: "Just beyond my field of vision is a Middle East in ruins. Syria is a graveyard, Iraq is devouring itself, and a mad dictator in Turkey is destroying his country's elite, Yemen is starving." In desperation for peace just over the wall from his home,

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<sup>1</sup> "Feeling the News" by Cassie Owens, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. B6, 2/13/20.

“What future...” the Israeli asks his Palestinian neighbor, “What future can our two peoples create here?”<sup>2</sup>

From the global to the personal challenges of coping with the stresses of vocation and family and illnesses and community issues, it would appear that the psychological common denominator these days is that life is overwhelming.

The good news is that there is actually a British religion professor at the University of Cambridge named David Ford whose studies in spirituality focus on the state of being overwhelmed. Ford believes that our most basic human experience is that of being overwhelmed. To be human is to arrive at moments in life when things seem so out of control that we become overwhelmed. He goes on to say that while life overwhelms, so too God overwhelms. The Christian spiritual life, itself, is based on the experience of being overwhelmed. The wisest way to cope, according to this highly acclaimed theologian, is not to try to avoid being overwhelmed, and certainly not to try to be in control of everything; but rather to live amidst the overwhelming in a way that lets one overwhelming thing give shape to the other.

I know this may sound counter-intuitive so listen to how Ford describes what he means: “Jesus Christ is the embodiment of multiple overwhelmings... He announced the Kingdom of God as something worth everything else, a pearl beyond price, a welcome beyond anything we could deserve... At the climax of his life he was betrayed, deserted, tortured, and he died crying, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me.’ Then came the resurrection, the most disorienting and transformative overwhelming of all.”

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<sup>2</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, p.195.

And so, Ford argues that because the Christian faith is itself the most profound experience of being overwhelmed, we can use our faith to give shape to the other things that overwhelm us. We take on an identity shaped by God's overwhelming us in the person of Jesus Christ. We integrate the rush and tumble of the various overwhelming components of daily life with intentional choices. We try to re-orient our relationships, vocations, our character, discipline, habits and time by rehearsing God's script for life – we are loved, we are forgiven, we are blessed, and we are challenged to serve God among the people Jesus called friends – the least, the lost, the lonely.

So... if the news is making you crazy, then find someone you don't much like – to love. If you're overwhelmed with a sense of scarcity – not enough time, not enough hope to hang onto, then reach down deep and find a way to share some of the abundant blessings you know you have. Ford says, that by paying attention to God's overwhelmings we can re-orient how we feel.<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus goes up the mountain of Transfiguration, one of those blinding, light-struck moments overwhelms the disciples. It is no surprise that the company they keep up there – if only for a moment – is Moses and Elijah, for they too had their own terrifying mountain top encounters with God. Jesus calls what happens at the Transfiguration – a “vision,” the purpose of which is to “pull back the curtain, to lift the veil, so that what is normally hidden – the presence of God and the hidden ways of heaven – can be seen.”

Jesus stands there, his face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white, chatting with Moses and Elijah as if suddenly swept up in a heavenly reunion. What we see in this moment is the overwhelming splendor of who Jesus really is, the son of God, the leader of a new Exodus – a road out of sin, a prophet above all prophets who not only

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<sup>3</sup> David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual directions for Everyday Life*, p. 46.

proclaims, but also ushers in God's new creation. Just before Jesus heads down the mountain, straight for Jerusalem and the horrors that await him there, here we are given a little pre-view of Easter... a revelation of an overwhelming glory to come.

In a commentary on Matthew's gospel one biblical scholar wrote: "Historically speaking, Jesus is on a death march, entering the gloomiest season of his life. In this heavenly light, however, his face and clothes gleam with the favor of God. The earthly Jesus is headed toward his doom on the cross, but suddenly we see not a victim, but a victor; not the one despised and rejected by the world, but the one beloved and well pleasing to God. He is already what he will show himself to be: the Son of God."<sup>4</sup>

The only thing this text demands of us – as Jesus stands there revealing the presence of God in person – is awe and worship. In a sense, it demands that we be overwhelmed every bit as much as his disciples, Peter, James and John were when they fell to the ground overcome. The difference between them and us is, the gospel tells us, that they were overcome by fear, so much so that Jesus went and touched them and said, *Get up and do not be afraid*. Which is a way of saying, I believe, that Jesus wants His overwhelming presence in our life to alleviate our fear, to heal and to redeem all the other things that overwhelm us. If it's fear that overwhelms us, Jesus says, "You do not need to be afraid." If it's all the bad news, Jesus wants us to attend to His good news. That's all that the word "gospel" means – good news. If it's the unsettled state of this old weary world, sometimes seemingly bent on destruction, Jesus has come from God to overwhelm us with God's love for the world.

There is a Christian community in Scotland outside of Edinburgh called the House of the Transfiguration. For many years, the leader of

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, p. 192.

this community was a man named Father Roland Walls. Earlier in his life, Father Walls had been in a bad place when he decided to go on a spiritual retreat which resulted in a turning point in his life. It was a three-day retreat, where the leader gave him three statements to meditate on, one for each day. On the first day, he was told to meditate solely on the statement “God loves you.” Nothing else, just focus your mind and your life on those three words for the whole day. The second day, it was time to focus on a second statement: “You can love God.” And then, after spending those first two days on those two statements, the final day, he was cautioned that this was the hardest one of all. “You can love others.”<sup>5</sup>

The progression of these three statements is as crucial to understanding how they can transfigure us, as seeing the history of salvation on that mountaintop in the persons of Moses, Elijah and Jesus. First, God gave the Law through Moses to establish civil human community in love. God loves us. When the people wandered, God sent Elijah – the great prophet to help those people overwhelmed by the corruption of their kings to trust God again, to love God again. We can love God. Then God sent Jesus to fulfill the Law and the Prophets – to show us how to love others again. We can love others.

Whatever it is that may have you feeling overwhelmed, the Transfiguration of Jesus is meant to overwhelm us with something so much greater that it gives shape to the rest of our lives.

With his face shining like the sun; his clothes dazzling white; the giants of the past appearing in Moses and Elijah, talking with him. A bright cloud overshadowing them, a voice from the cloud said, “This is my son, listen to him,” We are meant to be overwhelmed.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Ramsey, “Anger, Church, and the Gospel,” quoting a sermon Craig Barnes preached at Princeton Seminary Chapel, 9/27/19, in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2020, p. 27.

Overwhelmed by the power and the love of God revealed in Jesus, that we can go down from the mountain and into the world with a vision that can shape all the other things that overwhelm us.

AMEN.