

This week Drew Dyck, an editor at Christianity Today, wrote something he titled, “Fill Out Your Preacher Bracket.” He said: I filled out a March Madness bracket last week. For the uninitiated, filling out a bracket is simply predicting which teams will win the NCAA basketball tournament, from the first round to the championship. With 68 teams and 6 rounds in the tournament, picking the winners is an inexact science. That’s why I prayed over my bracket and promised not to gloat over my co-workers when God granted me victory.

Then I started thinking what a preacher bracket would look like. I can see it now: 68 of the nation’s top preachers in a single-elimination preach-off tournament. Who would win? T.D. Jakes would likely thunder through the first few rounds. Andy Stanley would topple opponents with his engaging, conversational style. Tim Keller would dazzle the competition with his scintillating intellectual insights. But never rule out the Cinderella. In the end, it just might be a small church rural pastor who surprises everyone for the upset and hoists the coveted pulpit trophy in the final.

Cue the confetti! Grab the scissors and snip the tassels off the paraments hanging from the pulpit! After 34 years of doing this job, I agree with Drew that some of the best preachers aren’t necessarily in the pulpits of the largest churches. Rev. Joy Hoffman was a neighboring small church pastor when I lived in Beaver County. She was one of the very best preachers that I have ever heard. Why? Because she could convey what is unexplainable. She could communicate the mystery of Christ in a simple message; something that is a lot harder than it sounds.

Peter preached two of the most powerful sermons recorded in the New Testament. The first was on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. The outcome of that Acts chapter 2 sermon, according to the Scripture, was that *“about three thousand were added to their number that day.”* Not bad, wouldn’t you say? The other remarkable sermon Peter preached is recorded in Acts 10 when he visited the house of Cornelius. That sermon began to bridge the historic divide between Jew and Gentile. Another truly amazing outcome.

The story of the Transfiguration is well-known but shrouded in mystery. Long before Peter preached these sermons, he, James and John went with Jesus onto a high mountain. Once they arrive they are suddenly met by Moses and Elijah! To add to this, a sudden bright cloud covers them, and they hear the voice of God. This leaves the disciples face down on the ground—*terrified!* Why certainly! But Jesus comes to them and says, *“Get up.” “Don’t be afraid.”* When they look up, they see only him.

If we put ourselves in the disciples’ shoes, we realize that they’ve had quite a night. There has been a lot they don’t understand, and it all culminated with hearing the voice of God speaking from a bright cloud. You can almost see their brains trying to make sense of what is happening. Peter says, *“Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”* What Peter honestly might have said is, “What in the world are we doing here? I’m not sure we should be here at all, Jesus. What should we do?” So he suggests something that might be useful by trying to set up three shelters or tents. Nevertheless, this is not an experience to be explained; it is simply something to be experienced.

We like explanations for what happens in our lives. Explanations give us a sense of control, a sense that we are directing the events of our days. When confronted with things that have no explanation, we get

scared! We make up explanations and we try to fit them into familiar categories so we don't have to live with the mystery.

But Jesus frees us from having to explain and understand everything we experience. He indicates we don't always have to explain life, but sometimes we simply experience it. To the Corinthians Paul wrote: *"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet"* (15:51-52).

The mystery of Christ is about changing. One dimension of the human predicament can be noticed in our reaction to the word *change*. In my experience not too many people love the idea of *change*. Obviously, the sick want to be well, and the addicted want to be free, and the imaginative want to be stimulated. I think many of us want small changes in our life—to be taller, slimmer, smarter or more physically fit. But not many of us respond well to change in organizations we belong to, like the government, the schools, or our church. Change happens slowly. Reluctantly, most of the time.

When we see something wrong in ourselves, in our family, our school, or church, we might be in favor of change. But when we are at peace and contented with all around us, change is disruptive. So we might hear *"we will all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet"* in very different ways. Some of us might think, "At least I've got until the last trumpet sounds before I have to change!"

The Greek word *musterion* is used seven times in the letter of Paul to God's holy people in Ephesus. The highest concentration of the word is in Ephesians chapter 3, where we read:

*2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the **mystery** made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the **mystery** of Christ... 6 This **mystery** is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus... this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this **mystery**, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.*

I am convinced that the point of the gospel story in Matthew 17 is to help us appreciate mystery, things that are unexplainable, so we can change from petrifying paralyzing fear into confident courageous faith. When we stop trying to control every situation we can let faith be our final and best answer when and where we are faced with the unexplainable. Did you notice this whole story is couched in unexplainable mystery? *"Jesus...led them up a high mountain by themselves...There he was transfigured before them...His face shown like the sun...His clothes became as white as the light...Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah."* *"And...a bright cloud covered them and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'"*

Well now. Does everyone understand that? I don't. This story goes beyond the miracles, beyond the wise teachings and the healings that Jesus' disciples had already witnessed. They were awestruck by what they saw and heard. They had no human explanation for this incredible event but they expressed a very human emotion. *They were terrified!* This was beyond anything they had known and experienced. In spite of Jesus commanding them, *"Don't tell anyone what you have seen..."* (17:9), it's impossible for me to imagine that Jesus' friends were not left utterly speechless. How could anyone speak about being in the presence of Elijah and Moses, the Father and the Son, a moment so charged with absolute celestial holiness?

Is it possible for this story to change our fear of the unexplainable into trusting faith? Yes, but we're not going to change involuntarily, or without a response to Jesus' words, "*Don't be afraid.*" What is the purpose of this Gospel story? I'm reminded of the words of John's Gospel—his summary statement of why he even bothered to write his Gospel. "*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:31). These words were written, these stories of Jesus were told, so that you and I will be *changed from fearful to faithful* followers of Jesus.

Paul Lundborg has said: There are moments in life when our self-satisfaction is shattered and we actually want to be changed. Hearing this story can perhaps draw us to that mountaintop so we long to be filled with awe and mystery in the presence of God. Wouldn't we love to be outside of ourselves, beyond our worries and burdens, totally covered in God's comforting, yet terrifying presence? I would. Something like that happened to Peter, James, and John, and even though we can't say they were *never afraid again*, because we recall how they fled in fear when Jesus was arrested, some newfound courage led them all to die a martyr's death. Could that newfound faith have been born on top of this mountain with Jesus and Moses and Elijah?

I've come to appreciate a word in the church vocabulary that describes the process of how God is at work within us. The word is *formation*, and throughout the ages the church's teachers and theologians have reflected on how God is forming us. Whenever we gather, we listen repeatedly to stories from the Bible, prayers prayed in worship, and hymns that we sing. The impact of those words chips away at the hard places in our hearts, rounds off the rough edges of our lives, and leads us in a particular direction. Slowly, ever so slowly, sometimes too slowly because we are impatient, we are being shaped in the likeness of Christ, drawn toward the love of God, molded by the Spirit. We slip and fall and are picked up and returned to the path; and the process goes on.

If we are honest with ourselves, we may have realized that we don't always want to be here in church. We don't appreciate every piece of music, every Scripture reading, every single prayer, or every last sermon. Maybe we would say like Peter, "**It's good for us to be here...I think.**" Sunday mornings may blur together with time, but they all work together to keep us nourished, strengthened, and alive.

You and I are being changed. We certainly don't have an explanation for everything. But God is still at work in us and through us. God isn't done with us yet. We are far from a finished product. But let us pray that we will be open to God's work, desire God's presence, and recognize the need for God's guidance.

Today's Scripture reminds us there are some incredible moments in our lives that are simply unexplainable. We can't even describe to another person exactly what has happened when they happen, but we can follow the One who knows our name and has called us to take up a cross and follow him.

Jesus frees us from having to explain and understand everything we experience. He tells us we don't always have to explain life, but sometimes it is best to simply live it.

Thanks be to God! Amen.