

SERMON: Outside the Box  
TEXT: Matthew 17:1-9

2-19-23

Jonas Nightingale is a traveling faith healer and revivalist. He is also a loud, clever, sleazy, manipulative showman and fraud. He is played by Steve Martin in the 1992 movie called *Leap of Faith*. When one of his tour buses breaks down in the rural town of Rustwater, Kansas, he sets up the tents and begins to gather his audience.

The late film critic, Roger Ebert, called *Leap of Faith* "the first movie to reveal the actual methods used by some revivalists and faith healers to defraud their unsuspecting congregations...."

There's a tiny earpiece in the preacher's ear, so that a backstage helper can whisper instructions: "Woman in red, sixth row aisle seat . . . has back problems." Debra Winger plays the woman backstage at the computer, the wizard of this particular Oz. Like her boss, she sees the show as good honest entertainment. People pay their money, and they leave with a few

laughs, a few tears, some great music, and maybe a little more hope than they walked in with. Where's the harm in that? [But] the local sheriff, played by Liam Neeson, tries to shut down the show because times are hard, the drought is killing the crops, and people don't have money to throw away on con men." (Roger Ebert, [rogerebert.com](http://rogerebert.com))

The climax of the story centers around a teenage boy whose legs had been crippled in a terrible accident years before. The boy becomes enamored with Jonas and believes in his power to heal. One evening at the revival, while Jonas was trying to ignore him, the boy got up on the stage, looked up at the giant crucifix hanging from the rafters, dropped his crutches and walked.

While the whole congregation rejoices, Jonas becomes angry, realizing that the tables have turned. The joke is on him when the God he's been mocking works a true miracle without any of his antics, without any backstage spies, without any smoke and mirrors. It gets me every time I watch.

No matter how many times I read or hear the story of the Transfiguration, it always seems like a smoke-and-mirrors kind of trick to me. As Jesus was standing there atop the mountain with Peter, James, and John, suddenly his appearance changed. "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." And suddenly, Moses and Elijah also appeared, and seemed to be talking with Jesus.

While Matthew writes of this moment in a rather matter-of-fact sort of way, any of us would be hard pressed to describe it at all. It was extraordinary, magnificent, amazing, and unbelievable. It was like nothing the disciples then - and now - have ever experienced before. It was truly a supernatural event. Paranormal. Mystical. Inexplicable. Something that is beyond our physical realm. Beyond our understanding. And way beyond our control.

James and John were probably frozen with fear. But Peter, as usual, acts on impulse. He wants to find a way to control that

which he doesn't understand. "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.'"

I think he was trying to capture it, like we captured fireflies or caterpillars or other insects when we were children. We closed them up in a glass jar so that we could study them, keep them, perhaps torture them, and certainly control them.

Peter needed a moment to catch his breath. He needed to pinch himself and rub his eyes to make sure he was wide awake and seeing clearly. He needed to think. He needed to figure out what this meant. If he could put each of them in a box, perhaps he could stop time and make the chaos of this moment manageable.

"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!'

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone."

This was an OUTSIDE THE BOX moment when the true identity of Jesus was exposed. With the sun shining on his face and the dazzling white of his clothes, he was in the spotlight on that mountain. Shining with the glory of God. Add the ghosts of Moses and Elijah, and we see how the Law and the Prophets have joined forces in the person of Jesus. As the voice from the cloud announces, repeating the words from his baptism, we are left with no reason to doubt. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

*Listen to him.* I dare say there's never been another statement that so clearly leads us to live and love OUTSIDE THE BOX than this one. Listen to him when he says, "Leave your way of life; follow me, and I will make you fish for people." (Matt. 4:19)

Listen to him when he says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matt. 5:44) Listen to him when he says, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 16:25) Listen to him when he says, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matt. 17:20) Listen to him when he says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22:37-38) Listen to him when he says, "As you do it to the least of these - feed the hungry, visit the sick, welcome the stranger - you have done it to me." (Matt. 25:40)

Such ways of life are OUTSIDE THE BOX, because without the teaching of Jesus, they just don't make sense. Selflessness, sacrifice, love for enemies - these are not steps along a typical, worldly road to success.

Especially for us Presbyterians who are known for having a “thinking” faith, it is difficult to accept the mystery of the Transfiguration. When we can’t explain it, we tend to doubt it. We are like Peter, wanting to keep everything contained inside a box where we can control it and study it and bring order to the chaos.

As one Biblical scholar commented, “We cannot know what that occasion was really like, or even that it happened.... Certainly we are not required to turn the biblical account of it into Fact. For what is significant in the account is not its ‘special effects,’ but what it affirms about the early church’s foundational belief about Jesus: namely, that he was not just another exceptional human being, prophet, or great teacher and example for all, but the decisive representation of the Divine, the source and judge of life. As one of the three disciples who is said to have been with Jesus on that remembered occasion stated the matter bluntly: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Matt. 16:6).... Until the church is able, in whatever language, imagery, and act, to engage in

such a 'leap of faith,' it will lack the confidence to take up its real mission in the world." (Douglas John Hall, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.1)

In other words, we need to allow for mystery. We need to let go of trying to explain the inexplicable. We need to know that we do not have ultimate control, and that God is at work in us and through us and in spite of us. We need to believe that miracles happen - whether with us or without us.

The true divinity of Jesus is revealed in the Transfiguration in sight, sound, and spirit. This is God's son. May we listen to him and may we follow. To the glory of God!

AMEN.