The transfiguration is odd. There’s no set up for it. There’s not a ton of context. It just sort of happens. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain and then all of a sudden he is transfigured. As I’ve read and studied this passage, I keep trying to picture what Jesus looked like. I mean, can you imagine what it must have been like for his face to shine like the sun? That would have been terrifying. And then all of a sudden Moses and Elijah appear. For those who are not well-versed in Hebrew Scriptures this may seem random, but for the disciples, these are like the all-stars of their people. Moses, the great leader who led the Israelites out of Egypt, who received the ten commandments, the law of their people from God. And then you have the great prophet Elijah too?! Elijah who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire and it was prophesied that when he returned it would be a sign of the Messiah coming.

So let’s put ourselves in the position of the disciples. They have just seen Jesus, their teacher and friend, shine and dazzle out of nowhere, and then on top of that, two of the most important figures in the history of their people appear and begin chatting with bright and shiny Jesus. How do they or we even begin to make sense of that? How do they even process what is happening before them?

Then, to top all of that off, a cloud envelops them and God’s voice comes from the cloud, which turns out to be the thing that finally does the disciples in. They fall to the ground, completely overcome with fear. Personally, I think I would have hit the ground when Jesus face began to shine like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white so I think the disciples deserve some credit for keeping their wits about them for as long as they did.

The transfiguration is exciting yet terrifying, strange and eerie. It is a very mystical, other-worldly event and here we are 2000 years later still trying to make sense of it.
When God’s voice comes through the cloud, I feel like I finally have something to grasp onto in this passage. “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased...” If these words sound familiar to you, it’s because they are. These are the same words said from the clouds at Jesus’ baptism. As John the Baptist brings Jesus up out of the water, the Spirit of God descends onto Jesus, the heavens open, and God says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Both Jesus’ baptism and the transfiguration are signs that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

Our own baptisms represent a transformation within us. We are plunged into the waters to be buried with Christ and raised to walk in the newness of life with Christ and each other, leaving behind our old ways. Our baptisms symbolize that we have chosen to become active participants in the body of Christ. We have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.

In the latest Star Wars film, there is a moving scene of baptismal transformation. Kylo Ren, the son of Han Solo and Princess Leia, has spent this latest trilogy causing death and destruction; he even kills his own father. As we get to know Kylo Ren and see all the harm he is capable of, his mother, Leia, never stops believing there is still good in him. Leia knows that her real son, Ben, is still inside. And the viewers can see the way Kylo struggles; he is torn about who he is. All of this builds to a moment where he is standing on a platform in the middle of an ocean, waves crashing over him as he fights Rey who has promised to stand for the good. Rey defeats Kylo and escapes in his ship and he is left alone, soaking wet on the platform watching Rey fly away.

All of a sudden, the audience hears the voice of Han Solo, “Hey kid.” Kylo turns around and there is his father who he had killed. “I miss you, son,” Han says. “Your son is dead,” Kylo responds. “No, Kylo Ren is dead, my son is alive,” and the viewer watches as Kylo Ren’s hard and angry face softens and is overcome with emotion.

He looks at Han and says he’s not sure if he can do it, he’s not sure if he can truly be Ben Solo again and turn from the darkness to the light. Han assures him he can, and he throws his
lightsaber, the weapon he used to cause so much pain and harm, the very weapon he used to kill his father into the water. Baptized in the crashing waves with his father telling him that he is still his son, Kylo Ren is Kylo Ren no longer, but finds renewed life as Ben Solo once more.

In the passages immediately before the transfiguration, some important things happen: Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer greatly and be killed, but he will be raised from the dead. Then Jesus shifts to telling his disciples that if they want to be his followers, they must take up their cross and follow him. Being raised to walk in the newness of life with Christ and each other means taking up our cross and following him. Which most certainly isn’t safe.

I’ve always felt a little sorry for Peter—he gets made the butt of jokes quite often because he messes up a lot. Sometimes he doesn’t think through the things he says before he says them, and then the next thing you know, Jesus is saying to him, “Get behind me, Satan!” All because Peter didn’t want to let Jesus, the man he knew to be the Son of God, die. So, when Peter suggests up on the mountain during the transfiguration that they build three dwelling places for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, I have to believe he has the best intent.

I don’t think Peter’s intent was to stay up on the mountain forever so he, James and John could spend all the time they wanted with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. I think Peter was worried about what was going to happen to his teacher and friend when they came down the mountain. Jesus had told him he would suffer and be killed, and I think Peter wanted to do everything he could to keep Jesus safe. He didn’t want Jesus to go back down the mountain because then he would no longer be safe. But the thing is, Peter can’t keep Jesus safe and neither can we. Whether we like it or not, Jesus has to go down the mountain and so do we. Lent begins on Wednesday and then we begin our journey with Jesus to the cross, and we can’t keep him from it.

In C.S. Lewis’ The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, the four Pevensie children stumble upon a magical land called Narnia where they are said to be
promised ones to help set the land free from the evil snow queen and the eternal winter she has cast. At the same time they arrive in Narnia, it is said that the great lion Aslan (who is the Christ character) has also arrived and things are changing. The good is coming back to Narnia, so the Pevensie children must go to Aslan and join him in the work of restoring Narnia.

They meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver who take them in and promise to take them to Aslan. Not knowing much about Aslan, Susan the second oldest Pevensie asks Mr. Beaver, “Is he quite safe?” Mr. Beaver responds, “Safe?! Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”

He isn’t safe, but he’s good.

There is nothing we can do to keep Jesus on the mountain and keep him safe. We also can’t expect to keep ourselves safe when we decide to follow Jesus, when we are plunged into the baptismal waters and raised to pick up our crosses and follow him. Jesus isn’t safe, but he’s good. Following Jesus, picking up our crosses, isn’t safe, but it’s good. You never know what Jesus might ask of you.

When the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. went to Memphis, Tennessee, to support the sanitation workers' strike, he was advised not to go. He had been receiving death threats, there was even a bomb threat on his flight to Memphis that delayed it. He could have stayed put; he didn’t have to go to Memphis. But he knew that it mattered for the sanitation workers. Memphis paid African American sanitation workers significantly lower wages than the white workers in addition to many other discriminatory practices.

While some people may not have thought the sanitation workers' strike to be worth it, because they were merely sanitation workers, King knew they mattered. King knew that Jesus sees the people society ignores and always takes the side of the oppressed. He knew that being raised to walk in the newness of life and taking up his cross and following Jesus meant he had to go to Memphis.

We all know that King was assassinated in Memphis. On the eve of his assassination he gave his famed and prophetic “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”
speech. He said, “I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will.” King knew that when Jesus said that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and that everyone is our neighbor, it meant the sanitation workers too.

You knew this too Wilshire, three and a half years ago you as a church decided to welcome everybody. When Jesus said that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and that everyone is our neighbor, you knew it meant the LGBTQ+ community too. Although it was not popular—it brought criticism and loss of relationships, and people told you your church couldn’t survive it—you decided to let the world know that this is a church where all people are welcomed and loved regardless of who they love. You as a church knew what it meant to follow the way of Jesus. Even though it was difficult, it was good and Jesus has not left us but has walked each and every step with us and continues to do so as we remain a church open to all and closed to none.

When the voice of God comes through the clouds to say, “This is my Son the Beloved; with him I am well pleased,” God also says to the disciples, “listen to him.” And I don’t think it is a coincidence that the first thing Jesus says to the disciples after this is, “Get up and do not be afraid.” The disciples are on the ground trembling in fear, completely overwhelmed by what they have seen, and then Jesus comes and touches each of them, saying do not be afraid. And when they look up, Moses and Elijah are gone and only Jesus stands before them.

Jesus stays with them. Jesus does not leave them alone trembling in fear. Jesus stays and calms their fears. Then the time comes for them to follow Jesus back down the mountain.

The way of Jesus is not easy. We have to give all of ourselves, and sometimes it isn’t safe or popular, but it is good. It is good to be transformed to walk in the newness of life with Christ and each other, to pick up our crosses and follow Jesus. It is good to love our neighbors as ourselves. The good news is that while this can be scary, while this can cost us something, we never have to do it alone. Jesus is
always there to touch us, give us a hand up, and calm our fears. Jesus will never leave us nor forsake us. He stays with us every step of the way.

So let’s walk down the mountain together, as people transformed to walk in the newness of life with Christ and each other.