I wrote in this week's Wednesday Words about a book I recently finished. Its title is *The Book* *of Strange New Things* and it's about a young pastor named Peter who travels to another planet as a missionary to the planet's native ...well, we'll call them people for lack of a better word. The plot has to do with humans colonizing other planets and taking what they want or need while making sure the natives are happy or at least complacent with what is happening. The story focuses on what the young pastor finds when he gets to his new worksite on Planet Oasis. Peter expects to have to start from scratch, to figure out if can find a way to communicate with the native people in order to explain Jesus to them. Peter is startled to find out that he's not the first pastor to visit the planet but the second. The first pastor told the people about Jesus and introduced them to the Bible while a linguist taught them enough English to communicate with the pastor. The people are absolutely awestruck about the Bible and its Jesus stories; they feel the word Bible is too sacred to speak out loud so they call it “The Book of Strange New Things.” Peter is swept up into the wonder and excitement the people experience as they learn about this Jesus who loves them and tells them to love one another. In fact, they are so taken with Jesus, the brand-new Christians re-name themselves “Jesus Lover”, then use numbers to distinguish themselves one from one another.

“The Book of Strange New Things.” The people on Planet Oasis are hearing about Jesus for the first time and the stories are strange and new and wonderful; they fill the people with a kind of joy they have never known. Their new faith in Jesus kindles in the people a fire to live life in a brand new way they never could have imagined before. The novel's plot starts with this new faith and gets more complex as the book goes on but it's the title and the way the people re-name themselves that will stick in my memory far longer than the story line. “The Book of Strange New Things.” That's what the Bible must have seemed to its first human readers. All the Old Testament stories of vivid characters chosen to carry on the faith, stories of war and treason and infidelity and calamity and a loyal remnant protected by God. The stories of a Savior who came into the world a peasant, who taught with humility and gentleness, who spoke of love and compassion and justice, who gave his life so those who came before and after would have a kind of life that never ends. If the Bible was considered strange and new by its first readers, imagine what it would have felt like to be part of the story as it was unfolding, as happened with Jesus' disciples.

Peter and James and John go for a hike with Jesus. Maybe the men think they're heading off for a short retreat, for that's the kind of thing Jesus likes to do after he's been working hard. It's when they get to the top of the mountain that the strange and new things start to happen. Jesus being transfigured before them. Elijah and Moses appearing out of nowhere. Peter speaking nonsense about building shelters for the prophets and Jesus. A cloud passing over and a voice descending from it, echoing the words Jesus heard at his baptism. Walking back down the mountain and being told not to tell anyone what they had seen, as if the disciples could find words to describe it anyway.

Strange new things. It doesn't get much stranger than what happened on the mountaintop. Drab traveling clothes become dazzling white. Dead people move and talk. God's voice comes out of nowhere. The disciples are still trying to get their heads around Jesus; his teaching and healing are strange enough without adding the scene they have just witnessed. Just when they think they might have a handle on Jesus, that they've discovered a pattern to their life with him, something strange and new happens to throw them off-guard. What could it all mean?

Transfiguration. That's the fancy word the church gives to what happened to Jesus on the mountaintop. What does it mean? I don't have a clue. That hasn't stopped me from trying to explain it over the years, in plenty of Transfiguration sermons that have sadly fallen short of what they could have been. I don't know how to describe the degree of whiteness of Jesus' robe or how it got that way. I don't know why Elijah and Moses appeared specifically, though I've read other people's theories about that. I don't know how God's voice could be heard or why it seems to come from a cloud. I don't know why Jesus told his disciples not to say anything, except that it was probably the best way to ensure that they did speak about what happened on the mountain.

Here's what I do know – or what I think I do, anyway. Jesus takes some of the disciples up the mountain with him so they can witness a strange new thing. The disciples see Jesus in a new light, so to speak, as one who has inherited all the power of God. Jesus is not just a prophet; Jesus is a prophet whose witness exceeds even the most important prophets from generations before him. When Jesus was baptized, it seems that only Jesus heard his Father's words when he came up out of the river. This time, the disciples hear God's voice speak out loud, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Now the disciples know things they didn't know before. They know that while Jesus is one of them, he's also something else entirely. Jesus' teaching has power and authority and they must listen to what he has to say, listen in a way they have never listened to any teacher before. All the healings and feedings the disciples have witnessed are signs that Jesus is truly the Messiah, the one sent to save them. Now they have heard God's voice confirm it. Now they walk down the mountain with heads full of wonder, mouths straining to find the words to explain what they have seen and heard, even as they have been told not to tell.

And I know this: that God has the power to make these stories that we read in the Bible appear strange and new and life-changing to us, even after we've heard them more times than we can count. This week we will enter the season of Lent. We will hear the stories about Jesus as he makes his way through Galilee, preaching and teaching until he reaches Jerusalem, where death awaits him. We look forward to celebrating Jesus' victory over death on the holy day of Easter. To be honest, many of us look at Lent as a time to endure, a time to get through until we get to the good stuff – the resurrection and warm weather and getting back whatever we gave up for Lent. That's one strategy to get through the next 40 or so days. Another offers more depth, more chances to have our faith shaped and deepened, more encounters with the strange, new presence of God.

On Wednesday, when we confess our sins and our total dependence on God, we receive the sign of the cross on our foreheads, the sign that reminds us that we came from dust and that we will return to it. God has created us from nothing and God will be there when our earthly bodies become nothing again, when our souls are welcomed into the fullness of his grace. In the meantime, we learn and grow and share what God has given us. This Lent, we have opportunities for spiritual growth, to gather in Bible study as we share the meaning of Scripture in our lives, to be humbled by what God has done for us out of selfless love. We have opportunities to share what we learn with others, even when we struggle for words to explain it, as the people of Oasis did. We even have the chance to experience strange new things as we travel, if we are open to God bringing them our way.

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Let's listen together over the next 40 days and watch for what can happen when the strange new power of God shines in our lives, transfiguring what we are into what God desires us to be.

Amen.

*Transfiguration B*

*February 15, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Mark 9:2-9*