

Pastor's Message – 2/19/2023
Exodus 24:12-18 Matthew 17:1-9 2 Peter 1:16-21

Today in our worship, we make a major shift. Seems like a long time ago now, Christmas Day and Three Kings' Day, but we have come over these last two months to the climax of learning who Jesus actually is. On our way into Lent and the continued call to learn about the Amazing Grace of God, we stop at a day the church calls Transfiguration.

Transfiguration is a big, churchy word, and one that may be meaningless not only to those who are new to the congregation or visiting, but to the more seasoned members as well. *Transfigured* isn't a word we stumble across every day, probably because jaw-dropping changes in appearance don't happen every day. To be transfigured is to be transformed, to undergo a metamorphosis, to change in appearance, condition or form.

We hear a story from Matthew today about Jesus' transfiguration. The story goes that Jesus took Peter and James and his brother John on a journey up a high mountain. When they arrived, suddenly Jesus began shining like the sun so that his clothes looked a dazzling white color. Jesus goes from being an ordinary Galilean peasant to an extraordinary, dazzling figure. And as if that were not enough, Moses and Elijah appeared alongside him. The disciples look at him and think, "This is *powerful*, this is *big*."

This isn't the first time a transfiguration is recorded in the Bible. According to the Book of Exodus which our Bible reading tells us today, this is Moses' second journey up Mount Sinai. In chapter 19, 5 chapters earlier, Moses meets God and, coming down from the mountain, Moses' face is shining, shining in such an unnatural way that he has to put a veil over his face lest he frighten the Israelites.

Mount Sinai is a mysterious place, enveloped in smoke in chapter 19 and in a cloud in today's chapter reading. Mount Sinai, wrapped in cloud, smoke, and fire symbolizes God's power, determination, and awesome mystery. There Moses met God. When Jesus and three disciples, Peter, James and John gather on a mountain, they encounter the presence of God in the transfiguration of Jesus and in a heavenly voice that proclaims a message that has been heard before, in Jesus' baptism, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him."

Peter apparently decided that the best way to cope with the situation was to initiate a casual conversation with Jesus. "Hey there Moses and Elijah! How y'all doin'?" Anyway, uh, Jesus, I'm really honored to be here for this momentous occasion. I'm sure you three have a lot to talk about. If you'd like, I could put together three tents for you guys so you could camp out here on the mountainside for a few days and catch up!"

Well, it was right about that time, when the disciples were lying face down in the dirt, that Jesus tapped them on the shoulder and said, gently, "Hey there. It's okay. Get up. You don't need to be afraid." When they looked up, all the scary stuff had gone away and only Jesus was standing there.

In his mountaintop experience, Moses was changed. In his mountaintop experience, Jesus is changed. In their mountaintop experience, Peter, James, and John are changed. In our mountaintop experiences, when we meet God, we, too, are changed.

When you meet God and are close to God, it is a blessing, but there is also an intensity to it. It's almost a burden, because the intensity of it is a lot to handle. For most of us, those kind of mountaintop experiences are great, but we're actually kind of happy down here on the ground. Biblical cultures assumed going to the mountaintop was a way to be close to God, but those encounters can be frightening and unsettling as well.

James will later write in chapter 4 of his letter, "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." Not that drawing near is necessarily easy. Notice that Moses had to step into the cloud to experience the reality of God's presence.

All of us have had those moments. We've all had times when it took everything we had to find the strength and courage to face our worst tragedies and fears: our fear of inadequacy, our fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, our fear of failing our families, or our friends, or ourselves. Our fear of judgment. Our fear of change. Our fear of heading in a new direction. Our fear of illness, disease, and suffering. Our fear of terrorism and disaster, both natural and human-made. Our fear of failing God, of facing the Lord in our final hour, of the accounting of our lives and the journey into the life that is to come.

I don't know how many of us do it. How do we even get up each morning and face the day? How is it that we are able to "get up and not be afraid" day in and day out, in the face of terrifying challenges, of life-threatening illnesses and the difficulty of living in this trying time in history. It is only by God's grace that any of us are able to get up to do anything.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is the good news in this passage.

Because when we find the courage and the strength to get up in the face of our fears, that's when Jesus taps us on the shoulder and reassures us. That's when the Spirit breathes God's very power and grace into us and we are transformed—transfigured—to use the words from Scripture. That's when we are transformed from being frightened, helpless people into being strong, able disciples who are able to go forth and serve in the name of Jesus Christ.

When we're going through a period of confusion and disorientation, it could be that we're precisely where we need to be, and that we're exactly where God is as well. Where did Moses encounter the Divine Presence? He found God in the fog. Moses was in a fog for six days! But so was God! For some of you, it might seem like six years. But God has promised to be in the fog with us!

The power of transfiguration is glimpsed on a mountain. The power of transfiguration is released in times of chaos, of crisis. As we know ourselves from our own experiences, life's significant changes do not always bring easier times. Instead, change requires us to face increasingly difficult realities. Those who have climbed such mountains have their work cut out for them. In the life of faith, there is a "defining moment." For some, one powerful and memorable event shapes faith; for others, there are several turning points or growth steps. But our story today reminds us that we don't go it alone and Jesus offers advice and direction and the way to get through the difficult moments of life.

Jesus' advice to the disciples as he helped them to their feet might be paraphrased as, "Get up, come down, keep quiet (until the time is right), then shout!" These four steps for getting off the mountain work just as effectively in our lives today. When God does something dramatic or something "mysterious" happens in our lives - good or bad - we too can get scared.

The sudden death of a loved one - how can death stalk us and life and God still be good? Or the recessive economy strikes home and suddenly we have no job, no career, no self-identity - how can we find a new path for life? Even positive experiences can confuse us. God calls us, challenging us to serve in ways that threaten the stability and comfort we have worked so hard for - how can we respond?

Get up: Jesus' first directive to his disciples was simple and clear: Get up! While still overwhelmed, Jesus got them on their feet. Getting out of the fear position and into a more positive posture prepared the disciple's minds and hearts to follow their bodies. Jesus specifically told the disciples, "Do not be afraid," for he knew the unpredictable nature of a fearful heart. To help them lose their fear, Jesus pulled them upright so that they could examine the now ordinary mountaintop.

Come down: After Jesus hoists the disciples out of the fear position and tells them not to be afraid, he immediately gets them moving. They do not stand around contemplating what they have just experienced. They are instructed to "come down." Jesus' counsel to all of us is to jump back instead into the mainstream of everyday life.

Peter had wanted to remain on the mountaintop when only Elijah and Moses were present with Jesus - he wanted somehow to prolong the glory by staying put. Neither fear nor fascination should keep us out of returning to the ongoing ebb and flow of life. Even if we don't feel normal, even if it seems we are just going through the motions, Jesus calls us back into the fray.

It is important to acknowledge the high points of life and give thanks, but we cannot stay there; we have to move on.

Keep quiet: Jesus differs most radically from self-help strategists when he gives his disciples their third command. After "getting up" and "coming down" Jesus surprisingly counsels them in "keeping quiet."

"Mystery" derives from Greek word *muein* which means "to close the mouth or lips." A mystery means literally something about which we must keep silent, something of which we cannot speak (see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967], 4:803). Or as Samuel Beckett liked to say, "Every word is an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness."

Jesus' advice takes the pressure off all of us who experience the incomprehensible and inconceivable in our lives. Death, disloyalty, visions or victories are all equally beyond finite understanding. So often these days specially designed "disaster teams" of therapists swoop down on individuals, families or even whole communities that have undergone some trauma or disaster, urging everyone to "talk about it."

Jesus prescribed instead a period of retrospective silence. Maybe Aaron Rodgers has the right idea. Some things take a while to make sense. Some things require gestation, not group therapy. We need not always know the answer to our questions of "what now" or "why me" - but we do need the time to listen to that voice from beyond ourselves hearing it say "be still and know that I am God."

Shout about it: Here is the proof Jesus is not outlining a short course in denial, sublimation and repression. His fourth step is an opportunity for triumphant testimony. After shaking free from fear, re-entering life and contemplating life's mysteries, Jesus declared that at

that point it was time to shout about it. For his disciples, this moment did not arrive until after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Only then could they recall the wonder of the Transfiguration moment and yell to the world that Christ is alive and in the midst of this and every mystery.

To see clearly who Jesus is, we have to jump to and beyond the resurrection. As the disciples are coming down the mountain after the Transfiguration, Jesus says to them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (v. 9). Christian truths can be seen only in the light of the resurrection.

Jesus advice is pretty simple: "Get up and do not be afraid!"

It seems to me that when Jesus told the three disciples to "Get up and do not be afraid," he was saying to them and to all would-be followers that part of having faith is having the courage to keep going forward even when we are uncertain, confused, or even frightened out of our wits. The cloud doesn't rest; the glory doesn't stay; the moment fades. The one thing you can guarantee is that the experience will pass. We just get these glimpses and that's what we have to live on.

But must we have firsthand experiences of Jesus' transfiguration as did Peter, James and John? Do we really need to have been there to experience the richness and spiritual power of, say, the Sermon on the Mount? Matthew's story today, Peter's words in his Letter bring us closer to the action. The Bible contains words that are infused with layers of meaning and personal depth that go far beyond the confines of time. The Bible, as a compilation of the stories of God's people, has the unique power of existing in both the past and present. Perhaps you would have liked to be in the crowd on that day on the side of the mountain, but in truth, you can go there anytime. The story transports you there, and its power can sustain you in the here and now.

You must pay close attention to what [was written]," Peter writes, "for [those] words are like a lamp shining in a dark place. . . Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God." (2 Peter 1:20-21)

The message of Christ is alive and well, trustworthy and divine. And the reason it was important for Peter's audience to grasp this, so important for us to lay hold of, is because his words bring immeasurable and much-needed blessing. That message is still available to us through the Holy Spirit.

Peter says, "You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts." (2 Peter 1:19) But how? The *Sarum Primer*, a medieval English devotional book offers this prayer:

God be in my head, and in my understanding';
 God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
 God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
 God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
 God be at mine end, and at my departing.
 Amen.