

Sermon Transfiguration A
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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February 23, 2020

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 17:1-9

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 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." 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. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Let's see how well you were paying attention when you were kids. "In the Great Green Room, there was a telephone, and a red balloon, and a picture of the cow jumping over the _____." Let's try another one: "One fish two fish, red fish, _____" Ok, what about this one: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the _____?" Here's one of my favorites: "Once there was a tree, and she loved a _____." "And they all lived happily ever _____"

At our house these days, we are reading lots and lots of children's books. And there are certain ones we read over and over...and over. As parents we are being asked to revisit the same characters and voice the same dialogue in seemingly endless repetition. If you've ever been asked to read to a toddler, you understand what I'm talking about. We've realized that there's a reason for this looping literary litany: Our little listeners want to hear the story enough times that they can learn it by heart, so that they can "read" it to themselves, or (even cuter) to one another. Their favorite stories are so important to them, they want to have access to these narratives anytime they want.

Story is an essential part of human life - for enjoyment, for instruction, for our shared history, for our faith. We can credit narrative with the promulgation of ethics and morality, - think Aesop's Fables - the development of systems of justice and education and with the perpetuation of our Christian faith. Our Liturgical year, from its outset in Advent to its finale on Christ the King Sunday, tells the story of the life of Jesus: his life, death, resurrection & ascension to glory. Here in the season of Epiphany, we travel from the Baptism of our Lord, through Jesus' teachings on the Sermon on the Mount, and then all of a sudden the story takes an unexpected twist. All of a sudden we're on top of a (different) mountain witnessing Jesus being transformed in a cloud.

Transfiguration Sunday comes around every year, just before Ash Wednesday. Every year, we encounter this mountaintop miracle, and yet, I think it can seem like an extremely random event slapped onto the end of the season of Epiphany. Jesus is just traveling along with his disciples, teaching, healing, rebuking Pharisees, and then one day, he takes three of them up a mountaintop, and starts glowing, talking to dead people, and hearing voices. And then, after it's all over, all that stuff disappears, he tells the three not to tell anyone about it, and then heads back down the mountain. Kinda crazy, right?

Well yes, without some interpretation, this event can seem quite random. But let's take a look at each narrative element we encounter here, at each one of the signs shown to those disciples that day. First, there's the actual "transfiguration" part – when Jesus' appearance changes in front of their eyes. His face and clothes become "radiant," they say, shining like the sun. This is not the first time something like this has been documented in Scripture. The "radiant" face of Jesus here parallels exactly what the people of God saw happen to Moses when he was in the presence of the God up on Mt. Sinai. We talked a few weeks ago about the correlations we see between Moses and Jesus, as spokespersons for God for the people in the Old and the New Testaments. This radiant vision of Jesus signaled to the disciples That with Jesus, they were in the presence of God. They could see with greater clarity the truth of who Jesus is. They saw him, as W.F. Albright said, without the "veil" of the present shrouding his true divine glory as the Father's only Son.

Then, once Jesus' appearance has changed, two Old Testament figures appear there with him. Moses – the giver of Torah, and Elijah – the most powerful of all the Prophets. When Peter, James and John witness the appearance of these two pillars of faith, they see that Jesus is not a solitary actor in this unfolding narrative. He is not some lone ranger out on his own trying to hijack the storyline or veer away from the arc of salvation history. With Moses and Elijah by his side, Jesus is revealed as the fulfillment of all that had been hoped for, the awaited Messiah.

Since back in the days when Moses first brought the people God's commandments, this is what they had been preparing for. Since the days when the prophets uttered the divine oracles trying and trying to convince them to return, to hold on to their God, this is what they had been hoping for – The Messiah: God's favor showered upon them in human form. The Son of Man, sent among them to reconcile them to the One who created them, who loves them, who will redeem them. Here, flanked by Moses and Elijah, Jesus' role in the story becomes clear. The disciples see that the writings of the Law and the Prophets – in other words – all of scripture – pointed to this: the revelation of Jesus as God's Son.

That's what this season of Epiphany has been all about: the Revelation of who Jesus is. And that's what the story of the Transfiguration is all about... ..In the radiant face of the Word made Flesh, In the accompaniment of Moses and Elijah... And if we still don't get it, in the voice of God that comes from the cloud saying "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" God's saying, "Obey him, heed his words, for what he says to you comes from me. After this, we can need no further confirmation. This is the Christ, God's Son, the reflection of his glory, in the flesh, the Word of the Author of Life.

But there's a catch, disciples: Don't tell anybody. Not "until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead," Jesus says to Peter, James and John. I'm sure at this point, you could have knocked these three over with a feather! Not only have they seen and heard the Glory of God in the transfigured person of Jesus, but now they can't tell anybody about it?! We hear this in multiple instances throughout the gospel stories: Jesus asks those who witness his glory to keep it under wraps. And that's because Jesus knows the way we operate. He knows that if they see all the glory, and none of the suffering, they'll start painting a picture of Jesus that ascribes to him our earthly concepts of kingship, not the truth of the Sacrificial Lamb he came to earth to be.

Yes, the shroud of the present was lifted to show forth the glory of Christ on the mountaintop, but that's not the end of the story. In fact, this is one of his last stops on the way into Jerusalem. Jesus will descend this mountain and continue on towards the place where he knows he'll be tracked down, arrested, tried and executed. Only then – only after his willing submission to betrayal, his suffering and death for the sake of our sins, and only after he is raised again to abolish the threat of sin & death forever – only then, will fullness of his glory be revealed. Only then will people truly understand who the Messiah is – Not just a king arrayed in glory, but a king who exercises his power through weakness – the Suffering Servant – the lamb of God.

Someone used to say, “On the mount of the transfiguration, we see the Jesus we want. On the mount of the crucifixion, we see the Jesus we get.” We don’t get to stay on the Mount of Transfiguration. We have to make our way with him to Golgotha. So no, Peter, don’t make dwellings for us to stay up on this mountain. And no, James and John – do not make known this vision to everyone, until after Christ is fully revealed, not only here, in bright raiment, shining like the sun, but there, on Golgotha, in the ugliness of the cross, and, at last in the echoing chasm of the empty tomb.

There’s a reason why Transfiguration Sunday comes just days before Ash Wednesday. Before we pause to face our mortality, and our sin that led to the Crucifixion, we are given a glimpse, up on the mountain, of the glory of Christ that we will encounter at the Resurrection. Before we enter Lent, our own faces ash-smearred and penitent. we get one last look at his, pure and radiant. It’s a gift of foreshadowing, to help us make it through the long forty-day journey to the joy of Easter Morning.

As Christians, we inhabit story. We live and operate within the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. We tell the story - as a Liturgical tradition - in a cycle of seasons and years, and we invite the story of Christ to be embodied in our lives. As difficult as it may be to believe at times, as God’s people, our lives are not just a random series of events; they have purpose, they have meaning. They have beginnings, middles, endings, and many more new beginnings than we deserve.

I remember telling a friend once, when I was going through a particularly difficult time, that I felt like I was in the middle of a good story, but I just didn’t know the ending. I knew that one day, I’d look back and be able to point to the ways God walked with me, the way God spoke to me, when I didn’t feel I had anything to say to him. (It turns out, it was through that very friend that I was hearing God’s voice the whole time.) And just as I suspected, now that I’ve come through that time of trial, I see exactly the way that story arc came to an end. And how God turned a page in my life. Unfortunately, when we’re in the middle of the story, it’s so hard to see the trajectory that leads us out of it. Even we know that we will get past it, it doesn’t make going through it any easier. But we learn to trust, through experience, and through the help of faithful friends, that one day, we’ll once again find ourselves the subject of a new chapter written in God’s very own hand.

Sometimes when the truth is still obscured, it’s because the story isn’t over yet. So when Jesus tells his disciples here on the mountain, “Tell no one,” it’s because he knows that his story isn’t over yet. He knows that no matter what heights or depths, or darkness, or light for that matter, they’ll experience on this journey of discipleship with him, that Resurrection will be the final word.

That is the story we experience again and again as disciples - The story we hear in the words of the faithful spoken all around us. The story we hear in the words of Scripture, The story we are invited to engage, over and over again until we know it by heart... that through the darkness, the confusion, the seeming randomness, the loss, the aging, the diagnoses, the heartbreak... Just as every story has a beginning, a middle and an end, that for us, if we wait for it, they will also always have a new beginning... that through Christ crucified and risen, Resurrection will have the final word.