

Transfiguration Reflection

March 3, 2109

Pastor Mary Koon

Matthew 16:26- 17:8

Our text this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew. The first part takes place on low ground, with Jesus teaching about the cost of discipleship, and then one on the mountain. It's the story of Jesus' transfiguration, typically the text we read the Sunday prior before Ash Wednesday, when we turn from the sparkling star of Epiphany to the dry desert of Lent in the six weeks before Easter.

The synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke, all have similar stories of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, and churches around the world read and teach this story each year on this Sunday. I appreciate that tradition and common focus.

The beautiful, sparkly stole I'm wearing this morning was a gift from the wife of my late mentor, Ken Stewart. It's super fancy and Transfiguration Sunday seems just the right time to roll it out.

The reading comes after Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and Peter answers, "The Christ." Jesus says that he will build the church upon Peter, the rock. Jesus then tells them that he will need to suffer, to which Peter replies, "No way, impossible." He doesn't get it.

I'm going to read from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*.

Hear now how God may be speaking to you through the scripture this morning.

Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?

Don't be in such a hurry to go into business for yourself. before you know it, the Son of Man will arrive with all the splendor of his Father, accompanied by an army of angels. You'll get everything you have coming to you, a personal gift. This isn't pie in the sky by and by. Some

of you standing here are going to see it take place, see the Son of Man in kingdom glory.”

Six days later, three of them saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.

Peter broke in, “Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I build three memorials here on the mountain – one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?”

While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice, “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.”

When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death. But Jesus came over and touched them. “Don’t be afraid.” When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus.

AMEN

I am DONE with winter. I am sick of shoveling, of walking like a penguin on ice, of numb fingers and feeling like a mouse in a maze when driving through town. I’m tired of my big puffy coat that is a magnet for salt and dirt. So I was shocked last Tuesday, when driving home from Session, how mesmerized I was by the glittering, swirling snow that danced in my headlights like thousands of tiny lights. It was enchanting. I turned off my audio book and simply drove in silence. And it was just snow, but it was more. The experience changed my perspective.

I wonder if Peter, James, and John felt a little like that on the mountain with Jesus.

They saw Jesus up there, only more...more luminous. More mysterious. The story has a mystical quality that defies easy explanations in our 21st century world.

From a literary standpoint, in Matthew, every time Jesus goes to the mountain, it anticipates something significant. In the 4th chapter, from atop a high mountain, Satan tempts Jesus with the promise of ultimate power over kingdoms and if

only Jesus will worship him. In the 5th chapter, Jesus' teachings combine in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. In the 14th chapter, Jesus is on the mountain praying before he heads toward the disciples in the boat, walking on water. On a mountain in chapter 15, Jesus heals – the lame walk, the blind see and the maimed are made whole.

Original listeners to this gospel would have known that extraordinary things happen on mountains, and as good readers, we can too.

And when the guys get to a stopping spot, Jesus is transfigured. His appearance is altered – changed from the inside out. His dirty, sweaty, bearded face shines bright enough to look like sunlight pours from it. His clothing becomes a dazzling white.

This brightness, this luster, is what the Bible calls glory. God's glory is revealed in Jesus. James, John and Peter see light shining, illuminating the Love (with a capital L) that formed them, teaches them and embraces them. The love that sends them out to be love the world. The sparkling, radiant love of the Creator for the creation.

The transfigured Jesus himself hasn't altered in shape or form—he has not become a winged angel, for example. It's more like the disciples catch a glimpse of his divinity. Frederick Beuchner writes that what they saw was the holiness of the man shining through the humanness. The truth of the really real.

And as if this isn't enough, Moses and Elijah are there too... whose who from the Hebrew Bible. The giver of the law and the ultimate prophet. The set-up is a little like a baton passing. And the image of Jesus with a shining face is very similar to Moses' face after he descends from the mountain after receiving the law (Exodus 34:29).

And then, a cloud – misty, glittery, light, and glowing with the voice of God from deep within.

And the men faint in fear. Upon “coming to” they hear and see Jesus.

An encounter with the holy may feel a little like this. Scary or confusing or exhilarating. Or it could feel a little more like a single, luminous moment like having a heart-to-heart chat with a new friend, holding a grandchild for the first time, grasping the hand of a dying parent. Or perhaps even a gradual and growing sense of God's presence that comes with prayer. However it happens,

God's encounters leave you changed somehow, transfigured, into a version of yourself that is more *like the you that God created you to be*. It offers a taste of the world as it could be.

As I was researching information on the transfiguration, I came across this gorgeous sonnet by Malcolm Guite, English writer. This is how he describes the experience.

*For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.*

This week, as we begin our journey into the wilderness of Lent, may the vision of the truth of the light, the sparkling, dazzling shine of unconquerable love let hope tingle through our tender skin as we continue with steady movement toward wholeness, toward a world that is transfigured, a little bit at a time, into a place

Where love of God and neighbor means that, all God's people can live in peace and the earth is restored.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. AMEN