

Transfiguration
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
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Matthew 17:1–9

A few weeks ago, the church entered the season of Epiphany, marked by the star that rose in the east when Jesus was born. The star the Magi and shepherds followed to worship Jesus. Today marks the transition time in the liturgical calendar when we turn from the brilliance of that star and journey toward the shimmer of the angel at the empty tomb after Jesus' death and resurrection. First, though, we must descend to the valley, and follow Jesus through the season of Lent, where there is pain.

Today we will climb the mountain with Jesus and his closest followers, and there will find transformative light, shining not from a star, or from a celestial being, but from Jesus himself.

Matthew tells us that this event takes place six days after Jesus tells the disciples how he will suffer and die at the hands of the authorities. Jesus tries to tell them how things are going to be, but they simply do not understand. In fact, this story is sandwiched between scenes of Jesus exasperated that his closest followers cannot or will not understand.

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

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

⁴Then 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.”

⁵While 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!”

⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As 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.” AMEN.

The church revisits this transfiguration story each year on the Sunday before Lent begins.

Jesus’ glory and brightness on the mountaintop serves as a backdrop to Ash Wednesday, when we will receive ashes, a visible, physical reminder of our vulnerable humanity, our finitude.

In life and in death, we belong to God. God on the mountaintop, God in the promise and celebration; God in sadness and pain and suffering.

The first listeners of this story, presumably those in the early church, would have remembered the story of Moses on the mountain, whose face shone like the sun, receiving the law and being led by God in fire and cloud. Familiar images in the faith set in the backdrop of the landscape of Israel and Palestine.

The writer of Matthew really builds on the mountaintop stories with Jesus. In Matthew’s narrative structure, every time Jesus goes to the mountain, amazing things happen. 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 (29–31), Jesus heals; the lame walk, the blind see and the maimed are made whole. At the end of the gospel, Jesus sets an appointment with his disciples on a mountain, where he sends them into the world to be his people. “And lo,” he says, “I will be with you until the end of time.”

In ancient times, people thought that God lived high above, and so mountains, literally and symbolically, got us closer to God. In not so ancient times, when churches were built, their steeples made them the tallest building in the village, closer to God in the heavens.

Mountains are majestic. Mountains are tall.

Have you ever climbed a mountain? One is not usually clean by the time one has scaled mud, rocks and shale. Sledding at Brookside Park yesterday, hauling a sled up the steep, snowy hill, it felt a little like climbing a mountain. After just one climb I had matted hair, damp pits...but after THIS mountain climb, Jesus’ dirty, sweaty, bearded face changed to look as though sunlight poured from it. His clothing, presumably grimy with dirt, became dazzling white. This is what the bible calls Glory. It radiates the creator’s eternal love for the creation. A love that embraces, affirms, and sends us out as servants of God. And from the cloud, God’s affirmation of God’s beloved Jesus, listen to him! Surely this was a God moment for those three disciples. It was what the Celts call a thin place, a time or experience that feels like, just for a moment, the veil between the secular and sacred is lifted and you can feel the closeness of God.

An encounter with the holy may be large and grand, like the one we read today, or more fleeting, like a peace-filled moment in nature, or holding

a newborn child for the first time, grasping the hand of a loved one for the last time. However, they happen, God moments have the ability to transfigure you into a version of yourself that is more like the you God created you to be.

Life brings heartbreak and suffering, we cannot deny it. But it also includes joy, meaning, beauty and celebration. And while our lives are fragile and vulnerable, we also cannot stop or deny the glory that is to come, the ultimate victory of Christ resurrected and what that means for us and our world. Love wins. If love isn't winning, the story isn't over yet.

There is a very tender moment in this story in Matthew that I don't think I noticed before. After the glory, after the vision of Moses and Elijah, after the great cloud and the voice of God, after the fear and the adrenaline, there is Jesus touching Peter. "Get up... do not be afraid."

It is my practice to allow Sunday's scripture to become the lens through which I view life for a couple of weeks prior to preaching. Last week, on vacation, I was away from newspapers and NPR. In that context, I focused a lot in on the sparkly, dazzling shining Jesus and the glittery, misty cloud of God on the mountain. One night, as I watched the moon rise over the Gulf of Mexico, I felt huge wonder and peace, and a sense of being very small in God's big universe. It was a thin place moment.

But this week we were back in the real world facing the start of a horrific war in Ukraine, seeing photos of women crying and buildings bombed, listening to stories of terrified children leaving their homes. We also learned about the new risk to our transgender children and youth in Texas and felt outrage and fear for them. We faced the judicial rulings after hateful acts of racism and mis-used power in our own city and the country, reliving the stories of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd. And, we simply cannot deny the fact, that two years into pandemic life, many

of us are very tired. It would be tempting to look away, to pretend that none of it had anything to do with us.

But the story of a transfigured Jesus can provide a faithful lens through which to process some of what is happening around us.

The transfiguration story helps us understand that we cannot build our sanctuaries away from the real world. We don't live atop the mountain. And there is no need to, for God will find us regardless, in our homes, our work, our lives, for where there is suffering, it is holy ground. God is there.

And I keep returning to God's voice in the cloud, "listen to him." And Jesus' words, "Get up. Do not be afraid." These are words of both encouragement and challenge, the kind of words that make the very best kind of sermon.

When we find ourselves discouraged, we turn to Jesus with listening ears. And he tells us that we are salt and light, that we are to love in all we do, God, others, self. That he offers us a place when we simply need rest because we carry heavy burdens. That prayer is restorative.

Jesus teaches that we are all connected, we are family. In the words of W.H. Auden in his poem "September 1, 1939," which was written in response to the day Hitler's Germany invaded Poland by land and air, Auden wrote, "We must love one another or die."

My friend, Reverend Steven Koski tells this story:

A photojournalist covering the war in Sarajevo was taking pictures when he heard a sniper's rifle. He turned to see a child fall to the ground. A man holding the child yelled, "My child's been shot. Please help." The photographer helped the man and child into his car and raced to the hospital. The man screamed, "My child's bleeding so badly. Please hurry!"

They arrived and the child was taken into emergency surgery, but it was too late. The man turned to the photographer and said, “Can you help me find this child’s father so that we can tell him.” Confused, the photographer asked, “Father? I thought you were her father as you kept saying ‘my child.’”

The man responded with the words that can heal the world, “They are all our children.” (Steven Koski, Facebook, 2/25/22: <https://www.facebook.com/steven.koski>)

When we read the news, and see images that cause us to feel deeply, we must not despair, for Christ has overcome the world

And Gandhi said, “When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it, always.”

As we face this hour, may God give us tender hearts and open hands, that we might be a safe haven for others. May God grant us the courage to sit with feelings when we face difficult news, knowing that when we cease to feel for another we cease to love. And may God guide us in our discipleship, joining those who are working tirelessly to bring justice and peace in our world.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.