

**Transfiguration Sunday/March 2, 2014**  
**Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; Matthew 17:1-9;**  
**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

*"Transfiguratively Speaking"*

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. It's a day that we celebrate every year in the church calendar and lectionary cycle, the last Sunday before Lent. It's a day much like the last day of the church year, the day before Advent, when we celebrate Christ as sovereign in our lives and seek to understand who he is for us. It's the day we remember that amazing and spectacular event witnessed by just 3 of Jesus' disciples on the mountain top, where they gained a new and deeper understanding of who this man Jesus was. This is a day when we remember a story that we all should know.

It really begins with a passage that Matthew gives us just previously to our reading for today. Matthew tells us that Jesus had asked his disciples who people were saying he is. And after they answer, he asks them more pointedly, "*who do you say that I am?*" And here we get the confession of Peter saying, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*" It is the first time any of his followers states clearly his identity as the Christ, the Son of God. It is a high point in Matthew's gospel as it points to Jesus' *true* identity. It is a turning point in Matthew's gospel, as it marks the time at which Jesus sets his sights on Jerusalem and on what will happen to him there, that he must suffer, be tried and killed and then raised on the third day.

That passage prepares us for the next part of the story, which we heard today. The three synoptic gospel writers - Matthew, Mark and Luke - tell us that it is not enough to *know* that Jesus is the Christ, we must experience him. But how does one experience Jesus as the Christ? How do we experience the holy in our midst? How do we understand something that is ultimately a mystery?

In the gospel of Luke, we have Jesus ascending the mountain with his closest followers, *to pray*. Prayer is important to Luke, and we clearly see in Luke that it is in *prayer* that we find and experience the Christ, the holy.

However, Matthew has a different take on it. For Matthew, it is not about prayer. Matthew never mentions prayer here. Matthew, who is writing for a Jewish-Christian audience, a congregation of early Christians who probably lived in Jerusalem or somewhere inside Judea and who were raised within the Jewish faith, seeks to place Jesus in the tradition and likeness of what they already know, the Jewish scriptures. For Matthew, Jesus is the new *Moses*. Like Moses, Jesus is the one leading God's people through a wilderness to a new kind of promised land. It is Jesus who represents the new and continuing Covenant between God and God's people.

And so we have all these allusions to Moses and his receiving the commandments of God. Like Moses, Jesus climbs a mountain. Like Moses, Jesus takes along companions. There is the mention of the 6 days before the encounter with God. Like in the Moses story where the God presence is represented by clouds that form around Mt. Sinai, there are clouds that engulf Jesus and the 3 disciples. The Moses story tells that after he encountered God on Mt. Sinai, Moses' face *shown*. It was so bright that it frightened the people of Israel and he would have to wear a veil after each time he went up the mountain to be with God. Here in the gospels, Jesus *shines* as well. But not only his face but his clothing and his whole self become radiant like the sun!

This story, one of the most central and important of the stories that would have been passed down, after Jesus' death and the apostle's resurrection experience, clearly carries on the connection between the early followers of Christ and the Jewish faith. At his transfiguration, this glorification of Jesus as the beloved son of God, he is accompanied by none other than the great representatives of Judaism: Moses, representing the Law and Elijah, representing the Prophets. It was these two whom the prophet Malachi (*Malachi 4:4-5*) foretold would come before the great *Day of the Lord* and the new age of faithfulness. The point is clear: Jesus is not presenting some new religion. His God is the God of the Jews. And his followers should not divorce themselves from their Jewish roots. However, they live in a time of new beginnings, of a new era, and are to have a new view of that God, a new way of knowing that God, and it is through the person and teachings of this Jesus, the Son of God, the son of humanity, that they shall know this. Ultimately, through Jesus, they are to have a deeper experience of God, of the divine, of the holy, of life.

But what is that experience? As so often happens in the gospels, the apostles show us what it should *not* be. We are given two reactions to the transfiguration. In the first, Peter, so excited by the sight of Jesus with Moses and Elijah, cries out, "*Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!*" He wants to capture the moment. He wants to place them each in a *dwelling, a booth, a tabernacle*.

The word here is the same one as that used in the Moses story for the tabernacle, the portable structure that housed the Ark of the Covenant, that held the Ten Commandments in the wilderness wanderings. As long as Israel had the tabernacle and the stone tablets with the commandments of God on them, then God's presence was with them. And it was understood to have great power. Remember the Indiana Jones movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? There was real power in that box!

But the God of Jesus is not one that can be boxed in and carried around. God is not something you can control or manipulate or save in a special place or secure just for yourselves. No, Jesus would teach that "*God is spirit and that those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth*" (*John 4:24*). God is free and is available to all. The voice that speaks from the cloud seeks to interrupt Peter's enthusiastic offer, suggesting this is *not* what the new vision of Jesus calls for.

The second reaction is fear. In the Moses story, the reaction of the Israelite people to the God presence on the mountain and to Moses when he came down from the mountain, was one of fear. For the 3 apostles, Peter, James and John, hearing the voice from the cloud speak, likewise frightened them. But Jesus comes to them, *touches them* and says, "*Rise and have no fear.*"

We can have the same reactions. We may clutch tightly to our religious beliefs, seek security in our traditions and in our own particular customs and ways of being. We may cling to a faith that makes us feel comfortable and safe. But in holding on too tightly to any old edifice we've built around ourselves, we may miss seeing any new vision that may be put before us. We may miss hearing the words that can lead us to new life.

We may also pull back in fear. Some people live their whole lives in fear. It can be a powerful force. We can become afraid to get up from the ground that paralyzes us, that keeps us from looking up at the vision that can ultimately free us.

The story of the Transfiguration is one that reminds us who Jesus is. It seeks to show us his identity as the one who can pull us away from those things that might hold us or constrict us, and as the one who can free us from our fears, from those things that hold us down.

But you know, I really struggle to understand the exact meaning of this whole thing, this Transfiguration. And maybe that's the point! Maybe we aren't supposed to really understand it, to know it in some intellectual way. Maybe we are supposed to find a way to be comfortable in knowing it ultimately as a mystery, as an experience which is beyond words, an experience that can only be described *figuratively* and beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

For in the end, that is what we are given in the person of Christ. An experience of a presence, of a deeper knowing, of something that calls out to us from the most inner reaches of our souls.

May all we do here together, open us to the vision, harken us to the voice, and avail us to the gentle touch of our God who tells us simply to rise and to follow. Amen.