

**Transfiguration Sunday/February 26, 2017**  
**Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; Matthew 17:1-9;**  
**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

*"A Glimpse of Transforming Light"*

The Transfiguration. A story of theophany, or an experience of the presence of the divine. A story of epiphany, of insight or a sudden realization, the manifestation of God in our midst. It is a story of a mountaintop experience, and like most mountaintop stories in the Bible it is about being in the presence of God.

It is a story we should probably pay more attention to than we do. It is an important story, so important that all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) recorded it. So I want to take you for a little journey, up that mountain with Jesus and his 3 disciples.

First, let's set some context to the story. Jesus was with his followers at Cesare'a Philippi, way up to the north, near Syria. They have been with him in his ministry for some time now and have seen him heal the sick, the blind, the lame, watched him cast out demons, feed thousands at a time, heard him speak in parables and give rabbinic teaching, refute the religious leaders, and greet children in his midst. And there he asks them, *"Who do people say that I am?"* and it is to that question, based on all he has seen, that Peter answers, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"* and Jesus blesses him for his answer.

But then Jesus begins to tell them some troubling things. He will be going to Jerusalem and there will suffer at the hands of the authorities, that he will be killed there, and then on the third day, he will rise. We who know the whole story of Jesus, can easily overlook the astonishing nature of these words. But can you imagine the response of those disciples? Those who were following the one they believed would become king of their nation, this one who was exhibiting power and wisdom and had a popularity with the masses that threatened even the Roman occupiers. This talk of dying made no sense. So Peter confronts him and tells him this cannot be. This cannot happen to you! But Jesus rebukes him, this one he had just praised, saying *"Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are setting your mind, not on divine things but on human things."*

And he tells them, that those who follow him, must deny themselves, must take up their own cross and follow him, that is, they must live as he lives. You can imagine them asking themselves, *"What have I gotten myself into? This isn't what following the Messiah is supposed to be about."* And you can see the dismay fall upon their faces, and the enthusiasm of their spirits sink. And they wait to see what will come next.

So Peter, the one so highly praised and so severely rebuked, along with James and John, brothers who thought so much of themselves that they would later dare to ask Jesus to be given positions of honor in his kingdom, follow Jesus up this mountain. It must have been a pretty quiet exercise. The disciples wondering with every step why they are with this man who wants to make himself a martyr. They wonder what will come of their future? And they ask themselves, where is their God in all of this? They climb with hearts full of despair, uncertainty, and fear. Will their lives have to change to remain with this Jesus?

And then something happens. Jesus stops. Have they reached the summit? The three, not too far behind, finish their climb, arriving there with him. We can't know what the reality of this story really is and we shouldn't try to explain it. But the earliest of his followers would later recount that Jesus was wrapped in light, that his face shown like the stories told of Moses' face which glowed after his encounters with God on Mt. Sinai. That it was ethereal, otherworldly. Jesus was changed, transformed into something different.

Then a shared vision. Moses and Elijah were there. How would they even know what Moses and Elijah looked like? Somehow they knew who they were. Peter is moved, suddenly inspired. He offers to make tabernacles, shelters, like those made for the Feast of Succoth, the harvest festival that celebrates God's protection of the Israelites in the wilderness and the ingathering of the wheat and the grapes, for the making of bread and wine, the reading of God's Law, the Torah, and the hope of a future when all nations shall be gathered in to worship God in Jerusalem.

But then a cloud covers them. Moses, who experienced God and the giving of the commandments and Elijah, who on another mountain heard God's still, small voice, they suddenly vanish. That representation of the Jewish Law and the Wisdom of the Prophets, which Jesus said he had come not to destroy or abolish, but to fulfill, they are clearly allied with this man, now one with him in his glowing presence.

A voice speaks, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."* Here on this mountain top, no tablets of stone, no still, small voice, but a living, breathing human being who is the living Law and Wisdom of God, the one who possesses the Word of God. To this one they must listen. This one who is now forever changed, forever transformed in the imagination of their minds, has also transformed them. They will never again be the same. They had been given a gift, a glimpse of something extraordinary, something eternal.

In the darkness of that cloud, the disciples fall to the ground, overcome by fear and awe. Was it an eternity or merely a few minutes? Such experiences are outside the realm of time. Next thing they know, is Jesus' touch upon their shoulders and his words *"Rise, and have no fear."* As they descend, Jesus will tell them they cannot speak of this until after the Son of Humanity is raised from the dead. True understanding cannot be grasped without the perspective of the resurrection. But that will come. They just don't know it yet. When after they witness the resurrected Christ, they will experience their own transfiguration, in the event of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, comes upon them, like flames of fire lighting upon their heads, filling that room with a light that will brighten the world, as they speak in the tongues of all nations, and begin the ingathering of all people to God.

This is a story that speaks a truth. It is a truth about our lives. It is a truth about our God. It is a truth that says that if we are to be fully human, fully the creatures that God has made us to be, then we must experience transformation. Richard Rohr, in his book that we are studying here at First Church, EVERYTHING BELONGS: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer, he says, *"It should be the work of Christians who believe in the paschal mystery to help people when they are being led into the darkness and the void. The believer has to tell those in pain that this is not forever; there is a light and you will see it. This isn't all there is. Trust. Don't try to rush through it; . . . Historic cultures saw grief as a time of incubation, transformation, and necessary hibernation. Yet this sacred space is the very space we avoid. When we avoid darkness, we*

*avoid tension, spiritual creativity and finally transformation. We avoid God who works in the darkness where we are not in control! Maybe that is the secret: relinquishing control." (p. 46)*

We may not experience theophanies, or epiphanies of great insight, or have visions of Jesus or of flashes of light in our dark times, but we can experience times of transformation and the presence of God working in our lives. When I was just out of college I didn't know what to do with my life. I worked for 2 years in a mission agency in Tacoma, Washington and then returned home, still not knowing where God wanted me. So I thought I'd "try" seminary, as the church had been a strong influence during my youth. I struggled in seminary. I did well, but it didn't come easy and I continued to feel uncertain as to my calling to ministry. In college I majored in Art Education and the call to do my art continued within me and I was torn between my desires to follow a path to artistic expression or to enter the life of an ordained clergy person. One day during my last year of seminary, I was attending a chapel service. I had been praying for guidance on this very thing. After going up for communion, I sat down in my pew and was moved to look up. There I saw the stained glass windows with depictions of people throughout history. After looking at a particular set of windows for a time, I realized that they were representations of artists. I was overcome with emotion, feeling that God was indeed hearing my prayer and telling me that I could indeed be an artist and also work in the church. In that moment, I felt changed. No, I didn't have a complete answer to my question of what I should do, but I felt the presence of God with me in my struggle and was given a glimpse of the transformation taking place in my life.

The story is told of Martin Luther King, Jr., who at a certain point in his life, after working so hard for the struggle of civil rights, experiencing the threat of attack dogs, fire hoses, angry crowds and death threats, knew what it was like to live in fear and uncertainty, not only for himself but for his family as well. One night, as he sat alone at his kitchen table, he said, he heard an "inner voice" telling him to simply do what he thought was right. That simple moment of inspiration, gave him a sense of clarity and reassured him that God was with him, giving him the courage to face whatever lay ahead. God was changing him, molding him and moving through him, making him that instrument who would set his people free.

Bruce Rigdon, pastor, church historian and leader of travel seminars, tells of a time as a graduate student at Yale, when he came upon a manuscript written by a 6th century monk, who suggested there is a miracle in the transfiguration story that is often ignored. The disciples had their eyes opened, and they saw a new reality. It was revealed to them that the way of Jesus was God's way in the world. The one whom they had been following had the power to transform them into agents of God's love and justice and to heal a broken world. (Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol. 2, p. 65).

As we know the struggles of our own time, as we confront the fears and uncertainties of our own lives, as we work and labor to bring justice and reconciliation to our world, we can easily be overcome by the powers at work against us. We may know frustration, we may know discouragement, and despair in our grief, become overwhelmed with fear. Yet, if we are willing, if we allow our eyes to be open to the possibilities of a new reality, then we, like those disciples, may experience the power of transformation through Christ, know the touch which takes away our fear, and become agents of love and justice in our world, gathering all in the love and light of Christ. Amen.