

Transfiguration of the Lord (Year A)

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, 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.'

We are, yet again, at that point in the year when it is time for us to pivot from Epiphany to Lent. We have spent several weeks since Christmas exploring these “Gifts that Keep On Giving” - that is, the gifts that Jesus brings us by becoming one of us in the flesh. Now, as Lent approaches, it is time for us to put those gifts to work and get down and dirty with the important work that Christ calls us to do in the valley in between today’s mountain story and Jesus being raised on the cross on Good Friday. Transfiguration Sunday serves as that pivot to turn our gaze to the journey ahead.

But first, let us look at what happens immediately before and after today’s passage.

At the end of the previous chapter, chapter 16, Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed and raised on the third day. Peter, you might recall, did not welcome such prophetic predictions. Peter grabbed Jesus’ arm and pulled him to the side to rebuke him and tell him that such atrocities must never happen. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter, telling him that he is being a stumbling block to him and that he should, instead, “get behind him” instead of trying to be the leader. Jesus goes on to turn this moment into a teaching one. He turns to the rest of the disciples and tells them that if they want to be his followers that they have to take up their cross and follow him and “lose their lives in order to save them.”

As for what happens immediately *after* today’s passage, Jesus heals a young boy possessed by a demon at the desperate request of the boy’s father.

All this is to point out that today’s passage is bookended by rather dramatic accounts of life or death situations. On the one end, we are talking about Jesus’ death and, at the other end, we are dealing with an intense scenario in which a young boy’s life hangs by a thread when a demon casts his body into both water and fire.

And, between these two ominous stories lies today’s Transfiguration passage.

The front of today's bulletin shows one artist's rendition of today's story. It's from a Christian community in Cameroon, Africa. It depicts a rather serene observation of today's story. On the left, you see Jesus standing in the middle with Elijah and Moses on either side as they appear to be deep in conversation - almost as if they are reminiscing about the old days. Covering more out of astonishment than fear are the three disciples - presumably Peter in the middle - looking as if he is about to interject something into their conversation - and James and John on either side. The painting is certainly remarkable and beautiful and meaningful, but certainly not scary or ominous.

A different take on today's passage - which I would have printed in the bulletin had I thought about it before the bulletins were completed - is the depiction of the Transfiguration by the Italian Renaissance painter, Raphael. His painting of the Transfiguration was the last painting he ever did before he died in 1520. Today, it is housed in the Vatican museums. Many folks consider this painting to be his crowning achievement.

Raphael's depiction of the Transfiguration stands in start contrast to the one on the front of your bulletin. You will notice a few points of difference.

First of all, Raphael's painting is not bright and sunny like the one from Cameroon. Instead, much more of the painting is dark, with blacks and deep blues.

Secondly, you will notice that, not surprisingly, the figures in the painting from Cameroon are persons of color whereas the people in Raphael's painting are lily-white.

Thirdly, in the painting from Cameroon, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are standing almost casually within a cloud. However, in Raphael's painting, Jesus and Moses and Elijah are majestically and magically floating in the air as the disciples before have been cast to the ground in utter fear.

Fourthly and finally, whereas the painting from Cameroon focuses exclusively on the story of the Transfiguration, the bottom half of Raphael's painting includes the story that comes immediately after the Transfiguration, the story of the young boy possessed by a demon.

It is this last point that I want to focus on. It is as if Raphael found it very important that the viewers of his painting not get lost in the "mountaintop experience" of the Transfiguration. You see, when we encounter God in miraculous, beautiful ways, we can sometimes get lost in the moment and not want to leave the beauty and the wonder of it all. We sometimes have the tendency to stay up on the mountain and escape, for the time being at least, the nasty problems of the rest of the world. Peter certainly felt this way. I suppose it was this desire to stay in the mountaintop experience that led Peter to blurt out and suggest that the disciples fetch some tents so they could all hang out for a while and bask in Jesus' transfigured glory.

But Jesus would have none of that. This is where we receive the gift of the unpredictable Jesus. Jesus knew that this was only a moment - a moment before the journey down the mountain, into the valley of Lent, and toward the long, arduous journey to the cross. Jesus knew that it was time to leave the mountain and enter the wilderness.

Raphael, I think, knew that as well. Perhaps taking note of Jesus' response, Raphael dramatically includes the depiction of the demon-possessed boy in the very painting in which he depicts the transfigured Jesus. Now, of course, it was very common for Renaissance painters to include numerous "scenes" in one painting. However, I find it very important that Raphael chose to pair this "serene scene" of the Transfiguration

with the very “sober scene” of the demon-possessed boy. These two realities met each other this time of year, when we gather to say goodbye to the season of Epiphany and say hello to the season of Lent.

You see, tough things are ahead. For awhile now, we’ve talked about things. Now, it’s time to do some walking. It’s time for us to go “Into the Woods,” to enter the wilderness. For several weeks now, thanks to the Revised Common Lectionary, we have been listening to Jesus talk. We have sat in these pews and listened to Jesus’ long-winded “Sermon on the Mount.” We have listened as he has spoken about viewing the laws of the Old Testament in a new light, in a light that is now shining from the Transfigured Jesus.

However, Jesus knows that there is a time for talking and a time for walking. Which is why today Jesus invites us to stop talking and to start walking up a mountainside together. And here we are. But one look at Raphael’s painting reminds us there is a LOT more walking to do.

Lent is a time of walking and doing. We have listened to the stories of Jesus. And that is all well and good. But if we do nothing but listen - if we do not allow the stories of the Bible to actually change the way we view the world and each other and treat the world and each other - then what’s the point?! If we do nothing but come to worship each Sunday at 11:00 A.M. at 1070 Lane Allen Road but never let anything we learn here change us “out there,” then I have some tough news, we are not Christians, but merely churchgoers.

Or, to put it another way, if we were simply to stay up on the mountain with the Transfigured Jesus - if we were to help Peter find some camping stuff and “sit down and stay awhile” - that demon-possessed boy at the bottom of the valley would continue to be possessed by a demon while we sit comfortably, basking in the light of Jesus and Elijah and Moses.

But Jesus will have none of that. And so, we begin the hard work of Lent, starting this Wednesday, smearing ashes on our forehead and reminding ourselves that we are but fleshly mortals who have been called, graciously, to join Jesus Christ in the reconciling work of the Gospel.

So friends, when there is so much work to do, do not be seduced by the mountain top experience. Let yourselves be transformed or even transfigured by it yet, but not seduced. Do not allow such mountain top experiences, whether they are “out there” or “in here” in this very room, to keep you from seeing the folks that need help in the valley.

Or, perhaps you, yourself, do not feel welcome on the mountain. Perhaps you feel that you’ve been perpetually stuck in the valley with the demon-possessed boy. Either way, Jesus leads us to both high mountains and lowly valleys where there is work to be done. Lent is a time of soul-searching, of Spirit encountering, when we, as both individuals and as a faith community, do the hard work of walking along Jesus to where he leads us.

May it be so in our lives and may God guide us as we begin this Lenten journey.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**