

February 26, 2017

Transfiguration Sunday

Text: Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

Title: Proclaim Transformation

It can be frightening to face the unknown. Sometimes we are excited about something that is coming up. We get excited about the birth of a baby, a new job, a marriage and many other things but even with the excitement there can be some fear or uncertainty. Will I be a good parent? Will I learn my job quickly and do it well, and will I really like doing this? Will the person I love still be the person I love when we are old? Almost every change in life has an element of uncertainty to it and sometimes that can be frightening.

The scriptures today relate to a time of uncertainty and transition for the people involved. The Hebrew people had left Egypt where they were slaves. They were following Moses in the wilderness – a journey that ultimately would last 40 years, although they didn't know that at the time. This was their opportunity to be a people on their own and there were many questions about how they would live together without someone controlling their every action.

Jesus' disciples were living in the middle of a profound change and it was about to get even bigger. Remember that they were good Jewish people; people, who unlike many of those around them, believed firmly that there was only one God. This was one of the things that they had learned clearly many many years ago, when Moses went up on the mountain to talk with God and received the Ten Commandments. The Romans, the Greeks, and many other cultures had many gods that they worshipped, but not the Jewish people. There was only one God.

It was not unusual for people to follow a particular Rabbi who would teach them more about God, their faith and how to live. There were, by now, a good number of people following Jesus, but the nagging question was whether he was more than just another Rabbi. Many believed that he was – that he was, indeed, the Messiah for whom they had been waiting; the Messiah who many believed would save them from the Roman government.

In Matthew's gospel, two very important things happened just before today's reading. Jesus had asked his disciples who people were saying that he was and then he asked them, "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter spoke up, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus had affirmed this and said that Peter had not discovered this on his own but that it had been revealed to him by God. Jesus also then told the disciples not to tell anyone who he was.

It is hard for us to imagine how incredible this statement of Peter's was. Calling Jesus the Son of God was like saying Jesus was God and this was a radical shift for any Jew.

From then on, Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him. He told them that he would go to Jerusalem and be killed and that three days later he would rise to life. Peter had objected and been scolded and accused of thinking like everyone else and not like God. Then Jesus told them that to be his follower they must forget about themselves, and take up their cross and follow Jesus.

Matthew writes that six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain. I imagine that their minds were filled with trying to figure out what was going to happen. The conversations of the previous days must have been swirling around in their heads. They must

have been trying to figure out what they could do, what would happen to them if Jesus were indeed killed; and what was this about taking up their cross and following him – did they face danger as well?

I think it was with this mindset that they went up on the mountain with Jesus and experienced the most amazing thing they had ever seen. We read that Jesus was transfigured, or completely changed – that his face glowed and his clothes were bright as light. We heard that Moses and Elijah appeared talking with Jesus.

In the Exodus reading we heard a similar account regarding Moses. Moses received the Ten Commandments and all the laws of God. Elijah was a prophet and it was believed by many that Elijah would come again and prepare the way for the Messiah. For Peter, James, and John this must have been an incredible experience. Here, they clearly had Moses the law giver and Elijah the prophet who was to prepare the way for the Messiah gathered with Jesus. This would have been a profound connection of history.

The voice of God came from the clouds saying “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” This echoes the words that Matthew wrote that God said at Jesus’ baptism. But there is something else, “Listen to him.”

The transfiguration of Moses and of Jesus were, I believe, meant to fuel the faith of their witnesses for the long and frightening journey ahead. God was letting the Hebrew people know beyond all doubt that God would communicate with them through Moses. God is proclaiming here, that God will communicate with the disciples through Jesus. This is my Son. Listen to him.

As many times as I have read this passage and preached on it, I was caught by something I hadn't really noticed before. Matthew says, that 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.'" I don't think I had ever really paid attention to the fact that Jesus had walked away from Moses and Elijah and had come directly to Peter, James and John. He had touched them.

On the mountain, we have both a powerful vision of God's glory, but we also have the simple touch of the one who they had been following and the message, "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid of what? Of what they had just seen? Of what was going to happen to Jesus? Of what they would do when Jesus was killed? Of what would happen to them afterwards? Of whether they might also be killed? Of what?

I think that Jesus' statement to them, "Do not be afraid" applied to all of this. This touch is the hand of God – the promise of God's presence, no matter what is coming. Early in Matthew's gospel, when the angel appeared to Joseph to tell him that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the child to be born was from God, Joseph was told that this would fulfill the prophet who said, "A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel, which means God is with us."

When the disciples opened their eyes, they saw only Jesus. They saw only Jesus – the one they had been following, the one to whom they were told to listen, the one who had healed, taught, walked with them and had now touched them and told them once again that they did not need to be afraid.

They left the mountain and went down where immediately they were plunged right back into their everyday life of people making demands upon Jesus to heal those they loved. Jesus continued to be with them teaching them, preparing them for the future.

Oswald Chambers wrote, “Up to the time of the Transfiguration, Jesus had exhibited the normal perfect life of a man; from the Transfiguration onwards – Gethsemane, Cross, Resurrection – everything is unfamiliar. On the Mount of Ascension the Transfiguration is completed. If Jesus had gone to heaven from the Mount of Transfiguration, He would have gone alone; He would have been nothing more to us than a glorious figure. But he turned his back on the glory, and came down from the mountain to identify Himself with fallen humanity.”

Jesus embodied being “Immanuel” “God with us.”

When we are faced with a wilderness that is filled with potential danger, do we let fear overwhelm our faith? Do we panic and begin to worship more instantly gratifying gods? Many of you will remember that following 9-11, a time when many in our nation were responding in fear, many of our churches saw a significant increase in attendance at Sunday morning worship. People were looking for an answer, looking for assurance, looking for the God who is with us.

As frequently happens when a crisis passes, many people tend to then toss faith aside because it has ceased to be of immediate use. The crisis has passed and we think we can manage things on our own and don't need God. In the weeks after 9-11, attendance decreased again to what it had been before the crisis.

I have often looked for those mountaintop experiences – something amazing that would help me to know that God is always with me. I have

experienced some of them – but the reality is that mountaintop experiences generally don't last. Our mountaintop experiences, or transfiguration experiences, the things that help us to truly know that God is always with us are more often the culmination of many experiences that seem ordinary at the time. They are, for most of us, the culmination of many worship services – some of which inspired us and some of which may have frustrated us. They are the culmination of numerous Bible studies or discussion groups. They are the culmination of many hours spent collecting or sorting food for a food pantry, reaching out to those in need, listening to a friend whose heart is breaking or who is afraid. God's presence with us in baptism, in communion, in prayer, in fellowship is what over time helps us to know with absolute certainty that God is always with us.

As I was writing this a post came up on my Face book page. It was a link that said: X-plan: giving your kids a way out. As I read it, I thought, "well, this is a God moment". The link talked about working with youth who are trying to recover from addiction. It described a plan in the author's family, where the youth or anyone who found themselves in a situation they couldn't handle, or felt like they were being backed into a corner could text a simple "x" to a family member. That person would call the person immediately, tell them that something had happened and they were on their way to pick them up. This was a good way to help the youth out of a difficult or potentially dangerous situation but it had another part to it. Afterwards, there would be no questions and no judgement. The youth was free to share what he or she felt could be shared, unless others were in danger in which case action was required. It sets up a situation where the youth or other person knows that someone is always ready to help – they are not alone.

This is at least part of what I think the transfiguration story says to us today. No matter what is happening, or will happen, God is with us, we do not need to face the future alone.

God comes into the world not only in a brilliant cloud of mystery or a thundering voice from heaven. But God comes to us also in a human hand laid upon a shoulder and the words, “Do not be afraid.” God comes to us quietly, gently, so that we may draw near and not be afraid.

C. S. Lewis wrote a wonderful series of books called the “Chronicles of Narnia”. In many ways they are an allegory of faith and life. In the book called the “Silver Chair”, Aslan the lion, the “Christ figure” shares these final words, “Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.”

My faith experience will be different than yours. We will all experience God’s presence in different ways and in different places, but what we share in common is that God has come to us in Jesus. Jesus places his hand on our shoulder and says, “Get up. Do not be afraid.” When we open our eyes, the one we see is Jesus – our companion, our teacher, our healer, our Lord and Savior. Nothing else matters.

As we come to prayer, let me share with you the words of Rev. Steve Garnaas Holmes:

Coming down from the holy mountain we know
we have not escaped the world's darkness,
we've found how light is hidden here.

It was no different from the rest of our lives;
we just took the time to remove our sunglasses
and see for a change.

Even ordinary light is miraculous and holy.
Christ lives and shines with infinite love and divine glory
in our passing days of laundry
and crabby co-workers and scrubbing the kitchen table.

Give thanks for momentary glimpses
of the fulness of God's glory,
but don't stare at the sun.
Know it's here,
and look for the light where you are. ⁱ

ⁱ Steve Garnaas-Holmes Unfolding Light