



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 19, 2023
EXODUS 24:12-18; PSALM 99; 2 PETER 1:16-21; MATTHEW 17:1-9

A TRUER STORY

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."]*

About 30 years ago, Will and I took a hike that I still remember vividly. It was on a trail from Independence Pass, Colorado, along the spine of the Rocky Mountains, tracing part of the Continental Divide. I've always been fascinated by the Great Divide, that geographical line that runs north-south from the Bering Sea all the way through the Western US, Mexico, and South America, separating the watersheds that drain into the Pacific Ocean from those river systems that drain into the Atlantic Ocean.

The dirt trail from Independence Pass starts at 12,095 feet, well above the tree line, and follows a rocky ridge with amazing views of Mount Elbert and other 14,000 ft peaks. The wind was constant that day and when we hiked the parts of the trail with steep drops on one side, it felt like standing on the wing of an airplane. It was thrilling and frightening; I remember at the highest part of the trail dropping to my hands and knees to catch my breath in the dizzying surroundings.

It remains a touchpoint for me of nature's fierce power and the awareness of my own finitude.

When I hear the gospel story today of Jesus' transfiguration on the high mountain, I remember that deep gulp of air on the Great Divide. Of course, the altitude is different – the Judean mountains are ¼ the size of the Rockies. But what James, John, and Peter experience knocks them to the ground and fills them with fear.

All three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – tell of the transfiguration and mark it as a clear inflection point in the story of Jesus' ministry; and each of them begins by referring to something that happened a week earlier. So that's important. Six days earlier Jesus foretells his death and resurrection and connects that to what it means to be his disciple. "Take up your cross and follow me."

I imagine that as they follow Jesus up the high mountain, Peter and James and John start to consider what it means for them to work and live in the manner of this rabbi. It is sobering.

And then it all happens so fast: Jesus' face shines like the sun – just like Moses when he encounters God on Mt. Sinai! He talks with Moses and Elijah – like he is a prophet of that order! A cloud rolls over them and the divine voice calls Jesus "Beloved" – he IS God's son!

It seems the wind is knocked out of the three disciples and they fall to the ground in fear.

I want to talk about their fear, but first I want to explore transfiguration. When Matthew writes, "Jesus was transfigured before them," he uses the Greek word "*metemorphōthē*," from which "metamorphosis" comes – meaning the complete transformation from one state of being to another. But the transfiguration is more complicated than the emergence of a butterfly.

It seems there are two things happening here, and they are a bit paradoxical. The disciples have known Jesus in his full humanity, the trusted teacher and healer who travels, eats, and laughs with them. But now Jesus reveals the fulness of his divinity, his kinship to God, and God's power to draw wholeness and holiness from partial humanity. He shares his identity in an unexpected and profound way.

It is staggering, but how much of it is really new? Maybe Jesus has been shining like the sun for a long time, and the important thing is that the disciples can finally see it! Their eyes are opened to what's been there all along – *who* has been there all along. Something has shifted *in them*. Maybe this is a story of *their* transformation. Maybe it's both.

And like all stories of scripture, it's not just about what happened thousands of years ago. I've been wondering this week where we

experience this dynamic of revelation and transformation. Where in sharing our full identity with another, we are both changed. One small glimpse I've have is in my journey to priesthood. I knew myself as a priest long before I was ordained, but I experienced it in a deeper way when I first offered a blessing to another person. It made what was already true tangible and alive between us.

I wonder if this flow of revelation and transformation is what it is like when a trans person shares the fullness of their identity with friends and family, and their loved ones see them afresh. It's not really *new*; it's how God has known them all along. But now their relationship holds a deeper truth.

When have you seen the essential self of another and been changed as a result?

Now, back to fear. When the disciples hear the voice from the cloud, they fall to the ground, terrified. This is the day it gets real for Peter, James, and John. They understand who Jesus is, why he is resisted by religious and political leaders, and what very likely lies ahead. The journey to the cross.

And they also know there is no turning back. True life is found in following Jesus, wherever it leads. And it can be scary.

So again, Jesus reminds them of who he is. He goes to them and touches them. The first words the disciples hear after the voice says,

"Listen to him!" are ones of encouragement. "Get up and do not be afraid." Another translation is: "Wake up! There is no need to fear."

When the author Gareth Higgins spoke at Saint Mark's last Wednesday evening, he explored the idea of fear as story. That behind fear is a story we tell ourselves about vulnerability, scarcity, inadequacy, or meaninglessness. Higgins said that in the face of fear, we must ask ourselves, "What is the story behind this? Is it true?"

And then we must find a truer story.

Maybe the story behind the disciples' fear is that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, which means everything will change. They are afraid he will be killed, and they will be abandoned. That this time of miraculous community and healing will be cut short. That all their hopes for the future will be crushed.

Is it true? They don't know; they can't see the future. They don't even understand the present.

So, Jesus helps them find a truer story. "Wake up; I am with you. Even though you don't understand this now, soon you will. No fear, no suffering, not even death is greater than God's power to heal and transform."

Following Jesus means looking for a truer story in the face of fear.

Today is the last Sunday after Epiphany; Lent begins on Wednesday. Every year on this day we hear the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the high mountain. It is an inflection point in Jesus' ministry as his full identity is revealed and the disciples turn with him toward Jerusalem.

It's also an invitation for us to catch our breath, remember who Jesus is, and lean into Lent with both a desire for our eyes to be opened to the fullness of God's presence and a willingness to be changed.

Amen.



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