

Sermon 2.26.17  
 Transfiguration Sunday  
 Rev. Lauren Cochran  
 Matthew 17:1-9



Before our scripture reading today, I want to spend a short moment talking about the context of this passage, because for the past month or so the lectionary readings have all been from Matthew chapter five, and today we are jumping to chapter 17, and then next week we go back to chapter 4 of Matthew.

Today's story of transfiguration, or a change in the appearance, of Jesus, comes after many chapters of scripture about Jesus preaching and healing the sick all over the various regions of the ancient holy Land. In chapters 15 and 16, Jesus and the Pharisees really begin to argue and spar back and forth... And just before this passage, Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is, and Peter answers with "You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God". Then, Jesus tells of his coming death and resurrection... and that's when we get to the scripture for today: Jesus' transfiguration.

You may be asking why we jump out of chronological order with this reading today. The lectionary has this text here not because of the timeline of the story, instead this scripture is picked for today because it's subject matter helps us transition from one liturgical season to another. Or, in not-so-churchy terms, this story helps us to put away those last few Christmas decorations of the season of Epiphany, and then prepare our hearts for the season of Lent, which begins on Wednesday.

This story we are about to read incorporates aspects of both seasons—the glorious white light echoes epiphany- the season of light, **and** the scripture tells of the hard practice of coming down the mountain even if it means hard work lies ahead—which is like our spiritual practices of Lent when we try to change our behavior and our hearts in order to prepare for Easter, even though it may seem miles away from now.

Ideally, this scripture helps to lead us out of Epiphany and into Lent. So with that, let us pray, and hear the word of God.

*Prayer: God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened and inspired by your message here. Amen.*

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 Jesus 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.'

Holy Wisdom, Holy word, this is the word of the Lord!

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So why does this happen? Why does Jesus invite some disciples to go up a mountain and see his transfiguration? Why does Jesus have a little chat with Elijah and Moses? Why does God repeat the words we heard at Jesus baptism- This is my son, the beloved, in him I am well pleased...?

Does anyone have any guesses? (why the transfiguration happens?)

By far the easiest, most straightforward, theological answer is that this moment is a reminder that Jesus is in fact, divine and holy, one with God. It is a temporary showing on the outside of the inside nature of Jesus, that pure white light reminds us of his sinless, God-nature. It's a confirmation of what Peter said 6 days before, that Jesus *is* the Messiah, the son of the living God. Jesus is divine.

Based on the reaction of Peter, James and John, they too assumed that seeing this vision served as a reminder to them that they are not with just any old teacher, Jesus *is God*- so they try to build tents or dwellings to house God-- They see all that Holy and want to stay right there forever; knowing that Jesus is God and life is good! End of story.

And that is good! It is good reminder that Jesus is God's beloved and a divine being who walked in our midst...But is that really all that is going on in this scripture?

I ask this question—is that all that’s really going on here—because Jesus has *already shown* his divine nature to the disciples:

- God named Jesus as ‘my beloved son in whom I am well pleased back in chapter 3 when the dove came down from the sky during Jesus baptism.
- The disciples have seen time and time again the healings from the hands of Jesus, the miracles of feeding thousands, calming storms, and walking on water.
- Surely the stories had been told of his miraculous conception and the divine presence there,
- And it was just before this walk up the mountain that Jesus first talked about that ultimate divine moment that was to come of conquering death through resurrection.

Sure, these stories of scripture may not be a flashy mountain top cloud experience like the transfiguration, but it’s pretty clear that Jesus is God. So why do the disciples need another example of Jesus divinity?

Do they really need more ‘proof’? And perhaps the answer is yes, they DO need more ‘proof’! I’m sure we’ve all felt that way at one point or another... wanting more ‘proof’ that Jesus is God and that God is present in our lives... but I don’t think that is what is going on in this scripture. Remember, Peter has \*just\* proclaimed ‘You are the Messiah’—they get it. The disciples know Jesus is God.

So this transfiguration is about *something more* than just showing Jesus’ divinity: it’s not just ‘proof’ that Jesus really IS holy... this moment on the mountain is an invitation for us to be transfigured too.

But Lauren, you might be thinking, Jesus does NOT say “ok, now your turn Peter! Come on up here in the white light! It’s your turn to be transformed! Ok now it’s your turn James! Come on in!”

Jesus does just the opposite! When the disciples suggest they should stay in that holy moment, Jesus is the one who leads them gently back down the mountain.

So what part of this scripture is an invitation for us to be transfigured?

Well, I pulled a page from the pastor-handbook, and I cheated a little... My reading of this scripture pulls from the entirety of the New Testament, not just this passage. The Greek word μεταμορφώθη (pronounce: metamorphuthee) in verse two, that means ‘transfigured,’ only appears in the Bible four times. Two of the four are in the Transfiguration story; one that we just read from Matthew, and the other in Mark. Interestingly enough, in the gospel of Luke, the author uses a completely different verb ἐξαστράπτων (pronounce: ezastrapton) which means glowing... there is no mention of μεταμορφώθη.

The other two mentions of this verb are from Paul as he writes his letters. One in second Corinthians, and one in the letter to the Romans.

Romans chapter 12 verse 2 reads: Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.

And 2 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 18 reads: All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, *are being transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord.

All of us are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. Holding these passages together (which you can't help but do when there are only really three times it is mentioned), it seems obvious to me that Jesus is inviting us to participate in a transformation as well.

In fact, this type of behavior is what we see Jesus do again and again throughout his life:

- Jesus was baptized and claimed by God, and invites us to do the same.
- Jesus broke bread with his friends, and invites us to do the same.
- Jesus died, was buried, and is risen and invites us to do the same through him...
- In the same way, Jesus is transfigured... he transforms himself to show all of God's love that is on the inside. And for a moment we can see what it looks like to be totally in the hands of God, that resplendent glory of handing your life to God and living in harmony... *and Jesus invites us to do the same, all of us are invited to be transformed from one degree of glory to another.*

This may come as especially good news to some of us, because perhaps there is someone here, *in addition to me*, who is feeling like they are in need of a transfiguration... in need of a change.

- Maybe there is someone who doesn't want to feel the way they have been feeling.
- Maybe there is someone who wants to step away from their anger or the petty arguments in their life.
- Maybe there is someone who wants to get rid of their own heart and replace it with the heart of Jesus.
- Or someone who wants to change from the patterns that drag them down every week: the patterns of neglecting God and putting your own self before others, the patterns of confusing what matters most.
- Maybe, just maybe, there is someone here who judges others before they even realize they are doing it, and they can't seem to stop.
- And perhaps there is someone who wants to stop lying or cheating or scoffing or gossiping or holding grudges or bullying or ignoring things...
- Maybe there is someone here (like me!) who recognizes how desperately in need of change and transformation they are!

... and so perhaps I'm not the only one who is relieved to hear the invitation to transfiguration... that through Jesus, God is promising me a transformation too, that God

will also call me beloved, and that someday I will be able to show that inner glory that happens when I am one with God. Can I get an Amen?

And not to neglect the other side of the aisle... perhaps there is someone here who feels like they don't need to change. Perhaps there is someone here who when honestly looking at their heart thinks there is nothing that needs to be improved or transfigured. And if that someone is here, I say kudos to you because you are in good company! Jesus Christ himself had no 'need' to change. But it's not always about *needing* to change, it's more about letting God be in control of our lives. *That* will change us in a far better way than we could ever do on our own.

So how does our transfiguration happen?

I know it's possible that if God wants to reach into our lives and 'poof', transform us in moment, it can be done. But more than just an 'impromptu-one-sided change of heart,' God desires relationship with us. God wants *us* to enter into the process of change and transformation of our own free will. God wants us to come along for the journey. Like Peter, James, and John, God wants us to walk up the mountain, be transformed, and then walk down the mountain too.

And what better time to try and do just this, than Lent, an entire season of transformation and change:

- In Lent we are changed from ashes to life eternal.
- In Lent we are changed from sinners to the redeemed.
- In Lent we are transformed from doubters and skeptics, to apostles sharing the good news to the ends of the earth!!

In Jesus, we have been shown the divine presence of God, and we have been invited to participate in our own transformation, and we have the chance to let God show us who we really are when we are in partnership with the Holy. As we enter Lent together, may God change us all. Amen.