

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration of the Lord
7th Sunday after Epiphany
February 23, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 24:12-18

New Testament Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 17:1-9 NRSV

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.”

Changing Clothes- And, Much More

When any of us is going to take on a project, especially something involving dust or grime or dirt, we get out of our dress clothes and put on something loose fitting that is **suitable** for the task at hand. An extreme form of this is found in sports, of course. Baseball uniforms stretch to allow the players ease of movement. A football uniform allows perspiration to evaporate and are designed to accommodate the special pads for the shoulders and thighs. In auto racing, you need a helmet, but also a suit that is made of flame retarding material, as are the gloves and shoes. These are all examples of using our clothing to perform a special task. What you wear **testifies**, if you will, to what you plan **to do**.

Something like that is going on in our **scripture lesson** today. Jesus and just a few of the followers, Peter, James, and John, have gone up to a high mountain to do something different. In the *Gospel of Luke*, the scripture states that they are going there to pray. This version of events lacks that detail, but the writer of the *Gospel of Matthew* is focused on other things. Looking back through the lens of the **Hebrew scriptures**, we can see that this writer wants his audience to remember something familiar to them. This description echoes the events surrounding **Moses** who **encountered God** and received the Ten Commandments.

In the *Book of Exodus*, the leader of the Hebrew nation went up Mount Sinai and met with God. When he came down, he did not look the same. Descending with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face **shone brightly** because he had been talking with God. The **change** in his appearance came from being in the presence of God’s infinite **power and might**. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.

But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Exodus 34:29b-35 NRSV

It sounds like a **permanent change** was underway for Moses. Everyone noticed it! In a similar way, Jesus had undergone and even more striking change: a **transfiguration**. Witnessing all of this, the disciples noticed that something wonderful has taken place. Take note of the scripture again:

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Matthew 17:2 NRSV

So, on the last Sunday before **Lent**, we see that this story of Jesus is about **change**. What better time to reflect on our life and our living as we approach Ash Wednesday? Are we taking seriously that God has entered the world in Jesus Christ and that everything has changed? These verses inform us that God is **with us!** That is the literal meaning of **Emmanu-el**.

Despite this truly **Good News**, which we regularly acknowledge in our worship, our rational minds want to filter scripture verses like these. Most of us find the description a bit too **fantastic** to be real. But, that is the purpose of these verses: to describe **awe and wonder**. Because, events like these are not of our making but come from God. And, God's power is infinite and beyond our comprehension. It is more comfortable and conventional to dismiss these events as **too fantastic**, playing down the **power of God** in this moment. Instead, human beings want to be self-sufficient, controlling and creating our own reality. Rather than looking to God, we want to **transform ourselves** into newer, improved versions through our powers of our will and our individual efforts. This is a false position, because God is **the source** of all that we have, including our **reason** and our will.

However, this scripture is not describing instant **self-improvement**. The text is written in this way to **awaken** all of our senses: to make us **question** our reality and our very foundation. Like the disciples, even the most faithful among is likely to become **complacent**. It is easy to take our faith experience at face value, as one more transaction in life whose significance is somewhere between a trip to the store and the celebration of our birthday.

In a way, the disciples are in the same fix that we find ourselves. They miss the full measure of the events taking place before them. Peter wants to build shelters to commemorate the visitation to Jesus: one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. Before Jesus can answer, the **cloud descends** upon them and **God speaks**. Despite these events, the disciples are pretty **clueless** about Jesus. They saw all this, and still did **not understand**.

This reminded me of the story of the American businessman who took a vacation in a small fishing village along the coast of Mexico. He began talking with a local fisherman who had just brought in his catch. The American asked how long it took to catch these trophy-sized fish. The fisherman replied that it was only a few hours. The businessman asked what the fisherman would do with the rest of his day.

“Oh, I will take care of these beautiful fish at the market, clean my tackle and boat, then go to my home. There I will kiss my wife, play with my children, clean up and have a fine meal with some local wine. Then, tonight we will visit with friends at the cantina and sing and play guitar. Tomorrow, I will take the day off, maybe the next. And, then, I will go and fish again.”

The businessman stops and thinks. “Well, if you fished everyday, would you have the same success?”

“Yes, but this meets the needs that I have. I own the boat, and I need little help.”

“Oh,” the American said, “But, if you had two more boats, you would have three times the fish each trip and you could pay down the loan you would need to purchase the boats and pay the captains and helpers. Soon, you could expand down the coast, and supervise them and have a lot more money and a bigger house and money in the bank and a secure future.”

“Well, that sounds very nice. How long would it take to pay off all the loans and to have enough money to retire?”

“Oh, yes, once you build up the business.”

“So, in a few years, would I have enough money to retire from it, and not work at all?”

“Certainly!”, replied the businessman.

“And, then, Señor, what would I possibly do?”

“Well,” said the American, “You would fish when you wanted and live near the coast with your wife and play with your children, and eat a fine meal by the sea with a bottle of good local wine; and, at night you would go out with your friends and sing and play your guitar.”

After a brief pause, the fisherman replied:

“Gracias, Señor. I will think about it.”

Like the characters in our story, sometimes we think of **transforming our lives**, but we get it all wrong. We lose sight of the important things that are **already around us**: the things that we value and the things that are good and go **unrecognized**. We might fail to acknowledge the casual friend at work, who makes **time to listen** to you unloading about your awful day. Or, the older gentleman down the street who never has a visitor, but greets you like you were part of his **family**, because you are the closest thing to family that he has. And, what about the schoolmate who sat and cried with you when your pet died last year?

We are not intentionally callous in failing to see **rich blessings** around us. But, it does speak to this very human tendency we have of failing to take in the **transformative moments** around us. This is something like the situation for the **disciples** and those who follow Jesus of Nazareth. They have experienced these transformative moments alongside Jesus, but they fail to recognize the **Son of God** fully for what he is, or why he is among them. With the

transfiguration, there is an impression of change that will not go away. In the original Greek, it is a **metamorphosis**: a permanent change.

And, Jesus knows his role, as well. He has told them what lies in the future for him- and for them. **He will go to Jerusalem**, suffer at the hands of the authorities, be killed, and through a mighty act of God, **he will rise again**.

But, no one gets the full message. Their minds remain **clouded by doubt**, by these magnificent events, by the magnitude of the changes Jesus proposes in his preaching. Or, more likely, the disciples and followers are unable to help themselves. Like you and I, they are faulty and **fallible human beings**, inadequately equipped to accept these big facts at face value. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to Thomas:

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

John 20:29

This is **true faith**, isn't it? Unlike the disciples, you and I have not seen Jesus. But, the writer of *Matthew* wants us to know that Jesus is **the Messiah**. He is of God, and is God in **human form**. And yet, like Thomas, we still might not be fully persuaded. The disciples have followed Jesus. And, here he is literally **shining** before them: **transformed** in body and spirit. And, God has pronounced this as a very **good thing**, and proclaimed Jesus as the **Son of God**.

Soon this is manifested in a real way. Jesus continued preaching and healing. He expanded his transformative ministry. He moved from the countryside into the holy city of Jerusalem, as we will see in the coming weeks moving to **Holy Week and Easter**. He will continue to treat the people in need, but he will confront those who **resist change**: Those who deny Jesus as the Son of God, along with the shift in thinking and practice of worship that God is demanding.

This portion of scripture is the **dividing line** for the ministry and the life of Jesus. His life's work among humankind was coming to its glorious conclusion very soon. This shift, this **Transfiguration**, is juxtaposed on **Lent** for a purpose. Writer and editor, **Jill Duffield**, called it a “foreshadowing of glory that might offer a glimpse of hope amid the horror of Good Friday and Holy Saturday....” (Duffield, *The Outlook*. February, 20, 2017)

Like the three disciples who witnessed this amazing and almost **indescribable event**, you and I will witness a change in the ministry of Jesus as we approach **Ash Wednesday** and the Lenten season. Are we ready to be **changed** and to move into a life of **compassion and witness** for God? Like Peter, James, and John, will we understand all that happened? For, God calls us and will transform you and me for a life of **ministry and service** for God, our Creator and Sustainer.

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