

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Transfiguration Sunday - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 2

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

02/23/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

1Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then 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." 5While 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!" 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9As 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."

The Gospel of the Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The Transfiguration

Good morning! If you're anything like me, you probably find the transfiguration just a little bit confusing. But I think this is because we don't have a frame of reference. It's kind of like the difference between reading about jets taking off at Langley Air Force base and then actually seeing them take off. I can read all I want to about the jets, about the amount of thrust that the engines have, their top speed, or how much they cost to build. But nothing can prepare you for the first time you actually see one taking off from the runway. The sheer noise! The way your whole body reverberates as the engines power up! After they have taken off it's just an annoyingly loud noise, but from the ground! It's like humankind has harnessed thunder and lightning.

The problem with the transfiguration is that we don't have that point of reference. We don't have anything to relate it with. Of all the stories and experiences that we read about in the gospels, this remains one of the hardest for us to approach. In fact, I have a confession that will illustrate my point. Until seminary, I had no idea what to even do with the transfiguration. I knew it was important, but I was lost when it came to figuring out how this story could be of any importance to me. I'm not the only one, our uneasiness with the story only goes to show that we are unsure of what to do.

I mean take the birth stories as an example. We can get behind the story of a young woman and her husband who are struggling to find accommodation, whose story is told with just enough detail that we can find the words meaningful. Or how about a healing story? We have all been sick before and so we can place ourselves in the shoes of the person who Jesus cures. Even the crucifixion is more relatable than the transfiguration! The story about a person who has been betrayed by a corrupt establishment is something we know and can understand. The injustice of the cross, while not something we like, is still something we can get. The transfiguration... well, it's just strange.

Douglas R. A. Hare writes that: *“For modern readers the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is one of the most difficult in the New Testament... Whether we reject the story as the product of pious imagination or, by the willing suspension of disbelief, accept all its details as historical, the fact remains that the story points us to mystery, a mystery beyond the reach of historical reconstruction or scientific verification.”*¹ Mystery he says... maybe that's the way we can get our heads around this story...

Let's take a look at what Peter does in the text. He tries to build a few dwelling places for the three men. Hare again helps us: *“The primary function of Peter's statement is to exhibit that humans cannot comprehend the scene...”*² RIGHT! That's what we've been saying all along! But then Hare continues; *“humans cannot*

¹ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 198

² *ibid.*, p. 199.

comprehend the scene without divine help.”³ It seems we need a little bit of Jesus to help us understand... Jesus?

Again, Hare helps us, writing that *“mystical experience of heavenly reality in the form of visual images has its place, but a very healthy emphasis is placed on God’s will as communicated through word. Seeing Jesus transfigured has value only if it leads the disciples to listen obediently to his divinely authorized teaching.”*⁴ What Hare is saying is that it’s not about what we SEE in the story, it’s about what God SAYS! *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”*⁵ It’s the command that becomes so important, especially in light of what happened right before Jesus and the disciples went up the mountain. Jesus has just told them that when they get to Jerusalem he will be arrested, crucified, and on the third day he will rise again. In fact, Jesus went even further and told the apostles that if anyone truly wants to be a follower, they need to take up their own cross and follow him. It’s this message that the voice from heaven is commanding the disciples to remember, and it’s that message that we too will need to obey.

*“Those who witness his heavenly glory must also witness his earthly agony. If his followers wish to share his future glory, they must be prepared to participate in his suffering.”*⁶ Hare writes. If we don’t take the words of Jesus Christ seriously, then all the visions in the world won’t make a difference.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 200.

⁵ Matthew 17:5b NRSV

⁶Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 201.

In a world where we can profess whatever we want, this command becomes a challenge. Just stop and think about your own life. How much of what someone believes to be true is based purely on their own experience or opinion. It can sometimes feel to me (see! I just did it there!) That objectivity has been replaced with subjectivity, without us even noticing! In a world where the opinion of every single person is valued and validated, being told what to do can feel alien. Christianity becomes less about our self-profession and more about how we live out our faith in our daily lives. It moves our spirituality from the emotional into the physical. We naturally resist. We're surrounded with so much that is grey and uncertain that this black and white command feels bizarre and abnormal.

Yet, this is exactly what we, as Christians, are called to do. The transfiguration comes up every single year at the same liturgical time: right before the season of Lent. It becomes a reminder that the upcoming season of self-discipline was modeled by the Messiah himself. It's important to remember that as Christians we don't uphold suffering for suffering's sake. It's also not an excuse to bring pain and suffering upon others.

It does help to give us a framework for our Lenten disciplines. People give up chocolate or they stop drinking pop for 40 days. Now this isn't a bad thing, but the key to this intentional "fasting" is in understanding our root motivation. If we give up something like chocolate because it's a minor inconvenience and we feel like we NEED to give something up, we've got it all wrong. But when we cut out things like snacks and sugar because we live in a culture of greed that ignores our own health, that's when we get it right. As Christians we take up our cross to suffer not because God desires that we

experience pain, but because so often our version of pleasure usually means the suffering of someone else. God comes to us, both on top of the mountain, and on the long road to Jerusalem. And so, let's begin that Lenten journey together, with Christ by our side. Amen.