

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Transfiguration of Our Lord - Year B

50th Sunday of Pandemic

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

2 Kings 2:1-12

Pslam 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

02/14/2021

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

2Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" 8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. 9As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

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

Amen.

Transformed

Good morning! Today we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration. Feast days are the most highly regarded of our church calendar, and you can tell when they occur by their color; white. While the bulk of our year is dominated by the long green seasons, we see a sprinkling of other colors. In Advent, we have blue, in Lent, purple, and on Pentecost and Reformation Sunday we break out red. But white is always reserved for the high holy days. The seasons of Easter, Christmas, Holy Trinity Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, All Saints Day, and today: Transfiguration Sunday. Now, I will confess, it seems a little unique to be in such esteemed company, doesn't it? Christmas and Easter make sense, Trinity Sunday is a given, and even the church new year, Christ the King, makes sense. All Saints Day is at least understandable... but this seemingly random story that falls just before the season of Lent... what's so special about it?

I've been asking myself that question in fear and dread ever since I realized that I would need to preach on this text in seminary. I'll be honest, I KNOW it's an important church festival, but it's always been hard for me to understand why. Even now, with this being the fourth time I have preached on this story, it still fills me with a sense of dread when I see it on the calendar. I think this is because it's a story that seems to defy all logic. So many of the details are alien, it's tough to connect with something so beyond us. Not many of us have climbed mountains, and I've personally not ever met Moses or Elijah. Nor have I ever seen someone's clothing turn glowing white. And while others might tell you differently, I've never heard a voice from the sky. So, what's really going on in this story? Well, I'm glad you asked, let's take a closer look.

The first thing to understand is the location. The text tells us that Jesus, Peter, James, and John all go up a high mountain by themselves. Why these three? They are the inner circle. Jesus takes with him his closest friends. This small group travels up to a high place. Now, you need to understand that location always plays an important role. For much of the ancient world, mountain tops were the domain of the gods. The Greek pantheon lives atop Mt. Olympus, and numerous other religions locate their deities up high. The Jews were no different. In fact, you could argue that the mountain top had even more significance for them. It was on the mountain that they worshipped God after Egypt, and it was on the mountain that God spoke with Moses. The mountain top was where God became known and experienced, it's where God's presence was revealed.

The next thing that can be confusing is the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Now, I can't begin to explain how or why they show up, but I CAN explain why it was Moses and Elijah specifically. What we have here are two titans of the Jewish faith and history. Why not Abraham or Isaiah? Or some other figure from Hebrew Scriptures? Well, nobody can come close to these two guys. They represent two guiding principles for Jews: the Law and the Prophets. The rules of governance handed to Moses on (of all places!) a mountain top. Elijah too had a mountain top experience. It was on Mt. Horeb that he witnessed the power of God and heard God's voice in the sound of a whisper. Moses and Elijah, according to tradition, said to have gone directly to God after they died. So when the disciples see Jesus talking with the two greatest figures of Judaism, they're suitably awed.

The other detail is the white clothing. Now, I don't know about you, but as soon as I put on a white shirt I get a stain. Fortunately, it's possible to get stains out of clothing now. In the first century it was A LOT harder.

And we're not just talking Jesus in a clean Hanes t-shirt here. We are given a glimpse of Jesus in heavenly raiment. He is GLOWING. Light seems to emanate from him.

And finally, we have the voice. This is an apocalyptic event for the writer of the Gospel of Mark. The apocalypse is just the revelation of God. And that is what we get here, God revealed, in both the form of Jesus, and in the voice from the Father in heaven. We have heard that voice one other time: weeks ago ago at the baptism of Jesus. It's no wonder Peter answers in typical Peter fashion. I empathize with the guy, he starts speaking before he even knows what to say! It's a characteristic of all extroverts like myself. In that uncomfortable moment and time of uncertainty, we fall back on old faithful... talking.

So... what do we make of all of this? "All the background information is helpful," you're probably saying, "but what does it mean?!" Well in order to get there we once again need to look at the beginning of the text. "*Six days later...*" it begins. As Norm Otto asked in Bible study on Monday... "Well! What happened six days before?!" It's an event that cannot be separated from the transfiguration story; they go hand-in-hand. Six days earlier Jesus tells the disciples that he will go to Jerusalem where he will be arrested, crucified, die, and three days later rise from the dead. For Jesus, and the writer of the Gospel, the Transfiguration cannot be seen and understood without the perspective of the cross. As one scholar writes: "*The boundary zones between the human and the divine are both disorienting and revelatory. Between heaven and earth, the everyday cues and perspectives that tell us who we are and how the world works no longer operate, but we may glimpse a new view of reality that transforms our*

understanding and refashions our world.”¹ That new reality is glimpsed on the mountain, but not understood until Jesus rises again.

On the feast day of St. Valentine, we are given a story about the sacrifice God is willing to make out of love for God’s creation. On a day that we have turned into a celebration of consumerism, commercialism and lust we are shown a picture of what true love looks like. The love of God is the way of the cross. Rodney J. Hunter writes that the way of the cross is “... *a vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the world’s game of domination, exploitation, greed, and deception.*”² It’s a call to each and every one of us to show our love not with diamond heart necklaces like in the commercials, but loving action that seeks to make the transformed Jesus seen and experienced for everyone in our lives. Amen.

¹Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year B. Vol. 1.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 453.

² Ibid. p. 454.