

Transfiguration A (2/26/17)

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 2

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

We can get caught up in the spectacle of the transfiguration. But, amid all the signs of God's glory, the true miracle of this scene lies elsewhere. Jesus' radiance, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the thundering voice of God are enough to provoke the disciples' astonishment. But, more compelling than any show of divine splendor is Jesus' loving touch and comforting word. Regardless of peak or valley, joy or suffering, we, too, can trust this word and touch today.

On the Sunday named for the transfiguration, I suppose it would make sense to focus on the special effects – the brilliant light that shines forth from Jesus' face, the mysterious appearance of Moses and Elijah, legendary figures from Israel's past, and the voice of God thundering from a cloud. It would make sense to focus on how this mountaintop spectacle recalls Moses' encounter with God in our first reading from Exodus, and so Jesus' transfiguration portrays him as a new Moses, and his life, death, and resurrection as a new exodus,¹ a new path from captivity to freedom. It would make sense to focus on the radiance of Jesus' clothing, and how it foreshadows the glory of his resurrection, inspiring hope in the face of his impending crucifixion as well as our own suffering and death.² It would make sense to focus on the power of memory, and how the vivid details of the

¹ See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 279, 281, 283; Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 348-9.

² See Davies and Allison, 283.

transfiguration speak to the first disciples' experience of Jesus, namely, to borrow the words of one interpreter, that

these untutored, down-to-earth men and women who left everything to follow him, hardly knowing why..., later, knew that they had been drawn to him because, for all his obvious humanity, something radiated from him that spoke of ineffable and eternal truth.³

On the Sunday named for the transfiguration, I suppose it would make sense to focus on the special effects. But I won't. For all its mystery and sparkle, Jesus' transfiguration itself is not what captures my attention most in our Gospel from Matthew today. Amid all the signs of God's glory revealed to the disciples on the mountaintop, the real wonder of this scene lies elsewhere.

Let's set the stage. Peter, James, and John have plenty to think about as they scramble up the mountainside. Surely they're troubled by Jesus' recent proclamation that he must "go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the [powers-that-be], and be killed...,"⁴ not to mention his expectation that the disciples take up crosses of their own.⁵ This is disturbing news – not what they expected from the Messiah, the Son of the living God⁶ – nevertheless Peter, James, and John leave behind the rest of the group to follow their Lord to a remote summit. And upon arrival, they bear witness to a true epiphany, nothing less than a manifestation of divine splendor. Jesus' face and clothing suddenly light up like the sun, and a voice bellows from a cloud,

³ Douglas John Hall, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 454.

⁴ Matthew 16:21.

⁵ Matthew 16:24.

⁶ Matthew 16:16.

“This is my Son, the Beloved... listen to him!” **Like the scene at his baptism, this spectacle affirms Jesus’ God-given identity and mission, and his visible glory stands as a stark contrast to the visible humiliation of his crucifixion, only a short time to come. Peter, James, and John are understandably astonished; this is a lot to take in, so no wonder they fall to the ground in distress.**

But the true miracle of the transfiguration is what happens next. Seeing his disciples lying face down, overcome by fear, Jesus comes and lays his hand on them and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.” **More compelling than any display of glory or any prospect of suffering is Jesus’ compassionate touch and comforting word to his followers. This is the true cause for wonder; this is divine love in the flesh.**

I was ordained several years ago on the 29th of June, which happens to be the feast day for Saints Peter and Paul. And that day, I suppose I felt a little like Peter at the transfiguration, both amazed at God’s radiant goodness and a little terrified at what this particular path might have in store for me. In his sermon, my internship supervisor left no doubt that the joyful anticipation of my new ministry would inevitably give way to suffering of some kind, although he expressed hope that I wouldn’t be martyred like Peter and Paul. But my feelings of both privilege and uncertainty at the occasion of my ordination were accompanied by a powerful experience of grace. As I knelt on

the floor of the chapel, the bishop of the Eastern North Dakota Synod prayed for me, and all the people assembled there – beloved family, friends, teachers, mentors, peers, and members of the congregation that had called me to serve as their pastor – gathered around and laid hands on me. A prayer of encouragement and a sustaining touch. **Despite my bewilderment at becoming a pastor that day, the living Christ did not hesitate to come near, rest his hand on me, and speak a word of comfort.**

Dear church, **regardless of peak or valley, joy or suffering, we, like Peter, James, and John, can trust the word and touch of Christ today. Whether we sense his holy presence amid our celebration or long for his accompaniment in our pain, we cling to his promise to be with us always to the end of the age.**⁷

So, when your neighbor greets you today with a handshake or a hug and says, “Peace be with you,” behold the love of Christ in her words and in her touch. Then, when your brother places bread in your hands and says, “The body of Christ given for you,” behold the love of Christ in his words and in his touch. And finally, when you’ve sung your last verse, listen for Jesus’ gentle yet confident invitation: “Get up, follow me from this place, and do not be afraid.”

⁷ Matthew 28:20.