

Transfigured, Transformed
Menno Mennonite Church
February 23, 2020

Purpose: To explore how we encounter the extraordinary of God.

Message: We are drawn to effective action when, sometimes, God invites us to faithfully witness what God is doing

Scriptures: Matthew 17:1-9 (Sermon Text); 2 Kings 2:2-14 (May be read)

Synopsis: We encounter God in a variety of ways. In most cases we fail to recognize the encounter that we have with the divine until the experience has passed. Like Peter, James and John our first response is to think of the requirements the situation presents, busying ourselves with activities and attempts to facilitate the encounter. Gapping fans, we most often fail to recognize the holy, and don't know what to do when to do recognize it. When we are given these fleeting glances of the power of God, our one task is to listen and to appreciate the gift that we are given. These moments, in the vast variety in which they arrive, are fleeting and only require that we relish them, allowing ourselves to be changed by the encounter.

Matthew 17:1-9

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

⁹ 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."

Matthew 17:1-13, Luke 9:28-36, Mark 9:2-10

About a week after predicting his own death,

Jesus took a trip into the wilderness,
Climbing a mountain,
To have time to pray.

Peter, John and his brother James came along.

While Jesus was praying,
The appearance of his face changed completely,
And his clothes became unnaturally white.

Suddenly there was Moses and Elijah,
Standing there with him,
Talking about what was to come.

The disciples,
who had grown sleepy
from the hours of prayer
were amazed.

Peter finally blurted

“Master it is a good thing we came along.
Let us build three dwellings,
One for you, one for Elijah, and one for Moses.”

as he did not know how to respond.

As he was speaking a cloud surrounded them.
A voice came from the cloud, saying

“This is my chosen one. Hear him.”

The disciples, who were thoroughly terrified,
Threw themselves to the ground
And would not even look up until
Jesus came and, touching them on the shoulder, said

“Get up. Do not be afraid.”

As they descended the mountain,
Jesus commanded that they not tell a soul
of what they had experienced,
until the Messiah had been raised from the dead.

As they hiked on down the mountain,
the disciples wondered
what Jesus meant by raised from the dead.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day of the church calendar where we come together to celebrate the glorious transformation of our Lord, celebrating the happy event with the first apostles as the glory of Jesus was revealed in full, hailing a triumphant reign forever as the victorious Christ.... No wait a minute. It says here that the disciples were terrified by what they saw, cowering before the awesome sight of a transformed Christ. This isn't quite it. Let's try this again....

Today is transfiguration Sunday, a day within the church calendar when we fearfully encounter the power of God unleashed, and leave charged to live a hopeful and fruitful life in the ongoing ministry of Christ, spreading the good word to all who care to hear... wait; that's not quite it either. Jesus commands James, John, and Peter to keep it quiet, until the rising of the Son of God from the tomb (not that they believed or understood what that could mean). Beyond that, Jesus is preparing for a life chapter that is anything but triumphant. It feels a bit too soon. Maybe another angle.

Today is the Sunday of the Transfiguration, where we recognize the continuity of the Godly succession of the prophetic work of God from Moses and Elijah to Jesus, recognizing with the disciples the big picture of the future that God has in store for them. This is the day where we come with the disciples to understand all that has been laid out before us. Again, this just doesn't work. There are elements of reality and the story in all of these, but here again, the disciples don't get it. They understand the whole messianic identity thing (it's kind of hard to ignore a voice from a cloud after all), but are torn by the practicalities of the moment far more than the theological import of what's going on. We have read the last chapter. We know that what is about to happen is both triumphant, and terrible; nothing like the visions of power and glory that these folks seem to have in mind, arguing about who will be at the left and the right hand of a ruling Christ, wondering what Jesus means with all this suffering talk. Perhaps another approach...

Today, as we celebrate the transfiguration of Christ, we hear the story again of a powerful and wonderful display of the hand of God at work within the Scriptures. In doing this we stand with our brother and sister disciples, realizing that we really don't always know what to say, that

we don't always recognize the hand of God at work in the world. We are in awe of the movement of God in this story and within our world, and seek to find a way to be faithful in our response as we are invited to continue on with Jesus. Sometimes we, like they, are more scared and confused than exultant and confident in our response. It is not nearly as clear or as sexy, but I think it is rather close to the truth.

Transfiguration is one of those episodes of the Bible and the church year that you probably have not encountered outside of a larger high church experience. It is one of those stories that we don't know quite what to do with, despite being woven into each of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). It is one of those amazing Jesus moments that is so broad in its impact and grandeur but leaves us probably more than a bit confused. It is this turning episode, right after the disciples famously declare Jesus' identity as the son of God, the Messiah. From here on in we are on the long downhill march toward Jerusalem. To say that it is outside our experience (which means of course we don't quite know what to make of it) is the understatement of the century. We are left to wonder what precisely all this means, and where it takes us from here.

Perhaps that is precisely the point—not always knowing what to make of what Jesus is up to. Sometimes we are so drawn in to the extraordinary that we miss the reaction and interaction of the disciples and what THAT might have to speak to us. Because while I don't know what to make with Jesus chatting with the Jewish all-star team, I do certainly recognize myself in the disciples. And perhaps that is the point. Here we have Peter, James and John invites for some one-on-one time with Jesus to go out on prayer retreat. I can all but see them waving to the others as they took off for the mountain “So long Andrew! Be good now; mind the camp while we are off with the MASTER...” But any image of privilege or spiritual superiority falls away when they are faced with the revelation of God is up to. When they see the REAL power of God, and the full depth and breadth of the Christ, they have not the first idea what to do with it all. They have special alone time with the Messiah and are presented with the holy trinity of their faith identity (less YHWH of course) and all they can do is stammer. Like a dog chasing a car, having caught the thing, they don't have the slightest idea what to do with it.

So, they fall back on what they do know; what makes sense to them from a human perspective. Lodging! We can build lodging! Some nice huts a fire, some warm pita bread and we can chat the night away. They see the wonderous and want to solidify it by way of grabbing

on to the first effective action that they can come to. Shelter, permanence, and work they can do; witnessing holy figures and hearing the voice of YHWH they can't. It's kind of like the old TV trope of having the father go boil water as soon as the contractions start for a baby to be born. Sure, warmth and sterilization is great and all, but better still is getting the guy out of the way to DO SOMETHING; ANYTHING when through the mystery of birth, there is nothing actually to be done but to bear down, breath deep and hold on. Boiling water grounds one in the illusion that there is something happening around us that we have the slightest control over. Building shelters grounds the disciples in the illusion of helpfulness when their whole purpose at that time and place was simply to be faithful witnesses to the very blessing of God.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have sat with the some of the deep questions of Christian faith—with that which Christ asks us to do. Who are we in the world? What are we meant to be? How are we meant to behave? I am guessing that it was not lost on some of you that I did not spend a great deal of time describing how to effectively love our enemies, or to be salt and light in the world, or how to pray for those who persecute you while getting them to stop. I didn't spend a great deal of time on the effectiveness of this as a strategy in the real world. Just as Peter, James and John don't know what to make of this encounter on the mountain top, we don't always know what to do with what Jesus says to us along the way. They were looking for the practical strategy to preserve this moment and keep Jesus where he belonged—on the mountain top surrounded by the holy. Jesus all the while is looking toward what is next, and invites them to come and follow him to Jerusalem, to follow him down the mountain and into the valley where dwells that which they cannot imagine. Not because it is a strategy. But because it is faithful.

We long to be effective Christians. We long to have our actions make sense in the world, and make a measurable difference as we know them to be. We long to feed the hungry and not turn around simply to have even more hungry to feed. We long to preach the gospel and to end violence once and for all. We long to find the way of faith where we can effectively change the world. And that is good, admirable and welcome. But that, ultimately, is not what we are called toward. We would be called to be part of effective change; Jesus invites us instead to faithful witness, doing all of this simply in the name of Christ whole leads us to that which we cannot imagine. At the end of the day, we are invited to all of this simply to be faithful to the Christ who calls us to love the Lord our God with hear mind and strength, and our neighbor as our selves,

following where he leads. That's frustrating to us because it is hard to plan a calendar around faithfulness. It doesn't allow us to plan and build to bring the Kingdom of God on time and under budget. It doesn't sound a whole lot like the world as we understand it. But doesn't it just sound like Jesus?

Perhaps that is what this story has to tell us. We are being invited not necessarily to do God's work for God, finding the best strategy to cleanly spread the good news in the world, declare release for the captives and all the rest in the most linear way possible, but rather to simply find ways to faithfully tell of what we have seen and heard and bear witness to the God who loves the world so much he gave his only son to save it in word, thought and deed. As much as we want our marching orders in clear, specific and carefully delineated terms, rarely do they come to us that way. Rather, we are told to listen, to follow, and to pray for a new way, witnessing to God's kingdom on earth as it is heaven. And that is not easy. It's not always clear. It's not particularly easy to offer pre-packaged solutions, but it is faithful.

The job of the disciples on the mountain was to encounter God among them, opening themselves to hear the voice of Jesus in the world, and to follow faithfully even to the end of their very imaginations. We are always pulled in this tension between faithful living and our desire for effective action. Sometimes, happily, they coincide. Sometimes, they do not, and all we can do is keep following. We must always ask the question in each and every age, where do we see Jesus, and what might he be calling us to follow him into today, right now?

As we follow on down the mountain with Jesus, down toward Jerusalem, down toward that we do not know and cannot predict, may we be allowed the patience to follow faithfully after Christ, listening always for the voice of YHWH God that is building this world even still. May it be so, this season, and forever more; Amen.