

Matthew 17:1-9

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.’

The Real Deal

I hope that you come to church with an inquisitive mind. I hope you come asking yourself, “What lesson might I learn today that will help me get through the next six days or weeks or months?” or “What will draw me closer to God today?” The music, the light shining through the stained glass windows, the smile on the face of the person next to me, or just the lighting of the candles or the color of the altar linens, those are all sensual ways to bring you into a mindset that is receptive to God’s Spirit. And then there’s scripture, the amazing stories, the poetry, the ageless wisdom of people who were so inspired by God. We hear it and we read it, but let’s be honest; we don’t always understand it. And what you hear or read of scripture in the church is really bits and pieces. I think that once upon a time, when most of the world was illiterate it made sense for a church to just read a little passage, have the priest share something that may or may not be relevant to the scripture lesson, and send people on their way to be good neighbors and stay in line until next Sunday, *but we can read! And we have Bibles! I have Bibles to give away if anyone would like one.* And because we can read and we have Bibles we should take advantage of the wisdom and inspiration therein, and also familiarize ourselves with the order of events in any particular book, like Matthew. Yes I’ll finally return to my main message after that brief side note and tell you what happened six days prior to the events of today’s reading.

Six days prior, Simon Peter has won the grand prize! The Bible tells us that the disciples were competitive over who was going to sit on Jesus' right and left side when he took over rule in Jerusalem, and Jesus had asked them a few interesting questions six days prior. Jesus had been ministering for awhile, and the disciples had heard him teach and watched him heal and seen him walk on water and feed 5,000, and after all this, Jesus asks them, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' Now, without getting too deep, let me just say that 'Son of Man' was an expression used by an Old Testament prophet, and the expression was kind of mysterious. I mean, 'son of man' could mean any male human being, right? But this was understood to mean an apocalyptic hero, some great religious dude who was going to make Israel great again. And apparently a lot of people believed that this hero was going to be someone who comes back from the dead – the people are saying that the Son of Man is John the Baptist, but John the Baptist had just been beheaded by King Herod. Jeremiah was long dead, and Elijah, well he's an interesting case because some people believed that Elijah was still alive though no one had seen him in 800 years. You see, Elijah was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind, like Dorothy, but Elijah's tornado experience had delivered him from the hands of his enemies (unlike John and Jeremiah), and even today, if you go to a Jewish Seder today, the whole celebration ends with someone opening the front door hoping that it might be Elijah, only to be sorely disappointed and quip, "Oh well. Maybe next year."

Anyway, the "Son of Man" was supposed to be the return of a prophet, and people differed on who that prophet would be.

But then Jesus asked a follow-up question: "Who do YOU say that I am?"

And Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

And Jesus congratulates Peter for being the first to answer the question correctly, and then hands him the prize. Jesus says, "On you I will build my church," and it just so happens that St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is literally built on St. Peter as that's believed to be his burial site. But this is a great honor for Peter! It's interesting that a couple chapters later the Disciples have a dispute over which one of them is the greatest, whose going to get the best appointment, the most prestigious position. Maybe the other Disciples are jealous of Peter, though I don't think they should be because Jesus has singled Peter out to be the founder of the Church, but Peter is about to go to Christian Boot Camp. Jesus makes it his business to shape Peter into the person most honored by the Church, and Peter, as we'd say in the army, "is about to get dogged." After giving Peter this promotion

Jesus goes on to explain that he's now going to Jerusalem to be killed. And Peter must have been deflated.

"So Jesus, you're saying that I'm going to be the Second in Command of a movement that about to be squashed?"

For a moment Peter dreamed of working in a palace with his own office and an unlimited expense account...then the dream becomes a nightmare as he sees himself as second in line to be crucified. And the Bible says that Peter *rebuked* Jesus! I think Peter is the only person who ever did that. Rebuked Jesus! He says, "Jesus, you can't do that; too much is at stake for you to get killed. We're not gonna let that happen."

And Jesus, who knows what he must do, what God has willed him to do, sees that Peter is not thinking spiritually; he's thinking worldly. To Peter it's all about the power and the glory, who can claim the most of both, and Jesus cuts to the chase and says simply, "Get behind me, Satan."

That was six days ago. That's when Jesus had to spell things out for the disciples, telling them that if they wanted to follow him they needed to lay down their personal ambitions and instead pick up a crucifix. The world will never be tamed by a superpower; it will only be tamed by the love of God, and if the innocent must be killed in order for people to wake up to God's love, then so be it. We ask ourselves why Jesus had to die; perhaps a better question would be, "Why do we keep killing him?" Why don't we wake up to God's loving ways and start adopting them instead of fighting one another all the time? Is it because love is considered a weakness, a vulnerability, something that others will exploit? Are we going to get hung on a crucifix? Is that where we end up when we follow Jesus?

Matthew reports no news for the six days between this rather hard lesson that Jesus teaches his disciples and the event we call The Transfiguration. And the fact that Matthew says nothing actually says a lot. Those six days were probably very quiet, tense days, as it sank into the Disciples' heads that Jesus was going to die soon. This man who admitted to being the Messiah, the Savior of the People, says he's going to get killed, which means that he's not going to get rid of either of their enemies King Herod or Pontius Pilate. Not exactly the Messiah we had hoped for. Was he Messiah at all? And if he's not why am I following him into this death trap?

And then Jesus comes to a mountain, a mountain like Mount Sinai where Moses had gone to receive the Law from God while the people below worshiped a golden calf. But Jesus brings Peter and John and James with him. And on this mountaintop Jesus is transformed, Moses and Elijah appear, Peter scrambles around awkwardly,

and the disciples hear the voice of God himself. ANY DOUBT THAT THOSE THREE DISCIPLES HAD THAT JESUS WAS THE REAL DEAL would have disappeared after the Transfiguration.

So why didn't Jesus invite the whole group of disciples up the mountain to witness this? Why not let them all know? For the same reason that Jesus tells these three disciples not to say anything about this incident until *Easter*. The reason is this: PEOPLE ARE BEDAZZLED BY THE WRONG THINGS.

We like to see our heroes living happily in fabulous castles with servants at their beckoning. We don't like to see our heroes hung on crosses. And yet in which of those pictures do you see the love of God spelled out clearly? In the gaining of an empire, or in the giving of a life?

The Transfiguration is about God's grace played out in the life of Jesus. Jesus, who knows our every weakness, knows that we sometimes need a light show to remind us that he is our Lord. But he also leads us into a life of danger in a world that doesn't just surrender to God's authority, that doesn't live by God's laws.

And we begin the Season of Lent on Wednesday a time of fasting and soul-searching and realizing that we too are a lot like Peter, fearful of the path that lies ahead of us and wondering if we have the courage to follow Jesus as we approach Passion Week. And so the Transfiguration is a gift to us as it was to Peter and John and James. We can trust that Jesus is the Real Deal even as we walk a road fraught with danger. It won't be easy, and we all pass through death, but we are also raised to new life in Jesus.