

Year A The Transfiguration of the Lord Matthew 17 vv1 to 9

Hope...Until Christ Comes Again

This is a beautiful and strange other-worldly experience that confronts us in the Gospel today – an encounter with God that seems to come out of nowhere. We've been happily trekking along with Jesus and the disciples – witnessing their excitement at encountering and getting to know Jesus. We're learning alongside them what it means to be a follower of Christ, living in the kingdom of God. Our journey is interrupted by this phenomenal experience...Jesus glows a dazzling white, a voice from a cloud talks to us...and then things go back to normal again. What do we make of this experience? What is its significance? What does it mean? And what are we to *do* with this experience?

This journey that we are on with Jesus from the Epiphany to Lent is bookended by the exact same words: "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased." We first hear these words immediately after Jesus is baptized and now, we hear them again as Jesus is transfigured before us. The two events are clearly connected. In baptism, we become living members of Christ's body, living with him in God's kingdom. Baptism is an *ongoing* journey toward perfection...not only of our own, individual wholeness, but also wholeness together in a mended world. For Jesus, this journey was completed through his death and resurrection and ascension. Jesus was resurrected with a body that would never again die, a body clothed in the glory of God, a body for living in the coming perfection of all things...heaven on earth.

With his death and resurrection, his baptismal journey is complete. He tries to prepare his disciples for this – this transfiguration is sandwiched in between his first and his second warnings to his disciples that he will die at the hands of the

political and religious powers and be resurrected on the third day. In the transfiguration we are given a glimpse of his future – we are shown what awaits...a body clothed in God's glory, a body that will never again experience death. The disciples do not understand what Jesus is trying to tell them. They do not yet have all of the puzzle pieces like we do. No one has ever died and been resurrected before with a body such as this. Their understanding will come when they see the resurrected Jesus for themselves. In the meantime, without full understanding, they keep quiet. They *do* know at least one thing for certain. Jesus is God's Son. They hear the voice that silences Peter's human reaction of trying to do something in the strange newness of the situation. The voice of God, as at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, claims him as Son and adds, "Listen to him!"

Jesus is the saving message of God and is to be followed. With Jesus are Moses and Elijah. Moses represents the law of God given to God's people on stone tablets during their time in the wilderness after God has freed them from the empire of social and economic classes, inequality, injustice, and the constant struggle for more and better. Elijah represents the prophets – those who continuously pointed out to the people that they had returned to those unjust ways of empire and who tried to point them, once again, to God's way. God's way, Jesus tells us, is love – the equality and abundance for everyone that comes from selfless love. Love God, Jesus says. Love God and love neighbour. These are the two commandments that sum up all of the law and the prophets...for I have not come to abolish the law, he explains, but to fulfill the law.

In the midst of brokenness, Jesus is the love of God, the fully perfected love of God toward which all things are being drawn. Jesus is our connection, as we live

in this broken world, Jesus is our connection to the wholeness that awaits in the fully realized reign of God on earth as in heaven. Jesus was going to suffer as part of the movement toward the full realization of God's kingdom on earth. His disciples would be frightened, would desert him, would feel despair as they watched his painful death on the cross. His transfiguration today is his assurance to his disciples that, on the other side of the suffering, is the glory of God...
...complete healing, true joy, absolute peace awaits on the other side. Jesus' transfiguration today is *our* assurance of the glory of God that awaits us on the other side of suffering, at the end of the brokenness in which we currently live. Through the mystery of baptism, we share in Christ's death and resurrection that leads to the glory of God. It is ours. It awaits us.

We, too, will be transfigured, "from glory to glory," Paul tells us. Just as Jesus was on a baptismal journey toward resurrection wholeness, so too, are we.

Throughout the Gospels we see and hear Jesus' message to us – in his words and in his life. His message is not "Hold tight, do nothing and wait to be with God when you die." Jesus' message is a message for the living...he shows us and tells us how to *live* in God's kingdom because God's kingdom is here. The power of God is at work in the world, Jesus says. The power of the resurrected Jesus continues to operate in the world but the final and full coming of God's reign will not occur until Jesus returns in his resurrection body. At the transfiguration, in the midst of the journey, the Church is suddenly given a vision of the future: Jesus as he will be on the day God resurrects him and as he will be when he returns to complete the work of replacing the old world with the new.

The resurrection is the definitive sign that the path of transformation towards the new age is already underway. The story of the Transfiguration today, suddenly in the midst of our journey, is our hope to cling to...this is what's coming. Matthew wants the church to believe that participation in the kingdom of God is worth suffering through the divisiveness they are experiencing with the synagogue down the street and within their own community. For as long as there has been a Church, there has been conflict and division...suffering *in* the Church and *because of* the Church because of misguided interpretations of scripture...and suffering in the world because of the turning from God's way of love. Matthew's message to us is to stay firm in our hope. He shows us that Jesus was faithful even when rejected, and God resurrected him and *will* return him. If you endure, he assures us, God will be similarly faithful to you. You will be resurrected and will be part of the new world (this paragraph is adapted from material written by Ronald J. Allen at the workingpreacher.org website).

Jesus encounters God on the mountain top and is changed, transfigured. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became a dazzling white. Moses meets with God on the mountain and is changed – each time Moses encounters God, his face shines. We gather each week to encounter God in our midst and each week, we are changed, transfigured “from glory to glory.” But when the encounter with God ends, Jesus, and Moses, return down the mountain to continue their daily journey, bringing the experience of the divine encounter with them. Each week, after our encounter with God, we return to our daily journey – we gather to be sent. Each week, we, individually and as the Church, bring our divine experience with us into the world.

As we journey toward wholeness, we reveal God's kingdom to the world. We give to the world the hope glimpsed in the perfection of the transfigured Christ, the hope in *us* as we carry this Christ and his kingdom into the world with us. We – the transfigured – transfiguring – Church show glimpses of dazzling brightness in us...in our care for each other and for the world: in meals, cards, a kind word, in fellowship shared over coffee or tea, donations to the food bank, Christmas gifts, money raised and distributed to other charities and non-profits...

These are bandaids – and we know they are – but we cannot stop and we will not stop applying these bandaids to our brokenness and to the brokenness of the world until the world wakes up and turns to God's way of love and when Jesus returns bringing wholeness to all people, to all places, to all things.

The world's idea of bringing about social change is that one group of people – the people with “more” – carries out projects to benefit another group of people – the people with “less”. That, according to the Universal House of Justice in Haifa, Israel, is precisely what social change is *not*. It doesn't work. In his book, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, Anand Giridharadas exposes the rich and powerful fight for equality and justice as a sham. They continuously strive for change except in ways that threaten the social order and their position atop it. As Leo Tolstoy wrote long ago: “I sit on a man's back choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all means possible...except by getting off his back” (in *Writings on Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence*). Turning to God's way – the way of love – brings actual change, effects real mending of our broken world. As

transfigured people, together as a transfigured Church, bringing the hope of a transfigured Christ into the world we can effect real change.

To change the world, it begins with change in us. As we turn our gaze toward Lent, this is the time when our transfiguration into the perfection of Christ is intensified. We may fast, read more Scripture, pray more often...all of these things are meant to strengthen and deepen our relationship with God...to transfigure us so that we may transfigure the world. As Peter writes in his second letter, after testifying to the truth of the transfiguration of Christ because he was there, he says: "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19). The hope we gain on the mountaintop today with Christ is lived out in our lives on the plain below. Together we are a lamp shining in a dark place, moving toward perfection, until Christ comes again.