

Get Up
Transfiguration Sunday
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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 bright as light. 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 set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud 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 raised their eyes, 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.”

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I took my daughter Sarah on a trip to Turkey. It was January. While we were in Turkey we went to a place called Cappadocia. A snowstorm delayed our travel for a day, but we were able to fly the next day. Over a foot of snow had fallen. At one point on our tour, we were looking over a beautiful snow-covered valley. The sun was shining on the pristine snow, and the reflection was nearly blinding. Sarah, who has always lived in suburbs and cities, was awestruck. She had never seen snow without smog, dirt, and pollution making it kind of gray. She suddenly understood what poets had been saying about snow. It was a magical moment when her eyes were opened to the blinding beauty of fresh snow under a cloudless sky.

That memory of that day came to mind this week because of our gospel lesson. The brightest and whitest thing ancient people knew was fresh snow under a bright sun. When Matthew says that Jesus’ clothes were dazzling white, he was saying that Jesus shone brighter than the snow. Human eyes cannot endure such brilliance for long. We

have to put on tinted glasses to shield our eyes from the sun, especially when it reflects off the snow.

I'm sure that some of you could recite the story of the Transfiguration from memory because you've heard it so many times. We may be so familiar with the story that we no longer notice that it is one of the strangest stories in the gospels. It can be easy to overlook what it means. This morning, I will retell the story while drawing our attention to some key aspects that are easy to miss. We will see if this ancient story is still relevant for our lives.

SIX DAYS LATER

Matthew begins the story of the transfiguration by saying that that it was six days later that Jesus took three of the most trusted disciples with him to climb a mountain. It's a little confusing to say it was six days later without being clear about what happened days before. In the preceding chapter, Peter boldly declared that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But then Jesus told the disciples that he would soon go to Jerusalem where he would suffer much at the hands of the chief priest and scribes. When Peter objects to what Jesus said, Jesus told the disciples that those who would save their life will lose it, but those who lose their lives for his sake will find life. It was six days later that Jesus was transfigured in front of three disciples, but first they had to climb a mountain.

CLIMBING

Jesus tells Peter, James, and John to follow him without telling them where he was going or what he was going to do. We don't know what the rest of the disciples felt about those three being singled out. The others are left behind and forgotten. They don't even hear about what happened until months later.

But Peter, James, and John obey Jesus because that is what disciples should do. When the teacher said, "let's go," they went. We don't know what mountain they climbed, but ancient tradition said it was Mt Tabor in Galilee, which is just under 2000 feet tall. This means it was about as tall as Pilot Mountain, minus the dome.

It was full day hike up and back and there was no one else there. When they got to the top, they were probably tired and needed a rest. After they had some water and food, I bet they took a nap. What came next was a surprise. Whatever the disciples were expecting as they walked up the hill with Jesus, I doubt it was a miracle. When they

looked up or woke up, they saw Jesus shining like snow under a bright sky. We don't know if the disciple's experience was like that of Frodo in Lord of the Rings when he was able to see the elf Glorfindel in radiance as he appeared to other elves. Or perhaps it was similar to the experience parents have when the blinders fall from their eyes and they see their adult child as the wonderful person they truly are rather than the awkward child they remember. We don't know whether anyone else could have seen Jesus in glory. The text simply says that Jesus went through a metamorphosis, and the disciples saw him in a new light. That alone would have been amazing.

MOSES AND ELIJAH

But there was more to blow their minds. Suddenly they saw Jesus talking with two other people: Moses and Elijah. This is where the story gets really interesting. Moses and Elijah had been dead for centuries. They were two of the greatest prophets in the history of Israel. Biblical scholars for nearly two thousand years have pointed out that they can be seen as representatives of the Law and the Prophets in the Old Testament. So the Transfiguration tells us that the story of Jesus is linked to the Old Testament.

But I think there is more to Moses and Elijah than simply being a metaphor for the Law and the Prophets. Both were messengers of God who had risked their lives for the sake of the powerless. You probably recall that God told Moses to go to Egypt to save the Israelites from slavery. Moses obeyed. He boldly defied the arrogant king of Egypt, the Pharaoh, who was oppressing the people. Pharaoh claimed to be the son of the god Ra, and he demanded that people adore him and worship him, but the Israelites refused. When Pharaoh ordered his minions to snatch children from the homes of the Israelites, Moses turned the tables on the king. Moses led his people out of bondage and brought them a promised land. He also gave them a new law that even the kings of Israel had to obey. It was a law that demanded that people show mercy to immigrants and justice to the poor.

You may not know as much about the prophet Elijah, but he also defied an arrogant and oppressive ruler. The queen of Israel in Elijah's day was named Jezebel. She enjoyed her luxuries and did all she could to enrich her wealthy and powerful friends. Under her rule, the wealthy became wealthier while everyone else grew poorer. Jezebel did not respect the laws of Moses. She believed that might makes right, and poor people have no rights because they are powerless. She brazenly stole people's

ancestral lands and killed those who protested. Jezebel also tried to silence God's prophets who demanded justice for the poor, but Elijah would not be silenced. He had to flee from Jezebel's soldiers, but with God's help, Elijah eventually prevailed. Jezebel was hurled from a high window, and the elites of Israel learned to obey the laws of God.

The disciples saw Jesus talking to Moses, who humbled Pharaoh, and Elijah, who humbled Jezebel. These two courageous prophets were blessing the path that Jesus was following and encouraging him to continue his mission. They blessed Jesus' struggle against those who used religion to oppress people. They blessed Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem that would lead him before the judgment seat of Pilate and then a difficult climb up another mountain called Golgotha.

And Jesus wanted his three most trusted disciples to understand that he was walking in the path Moses and Elijah. He wanted Peter, James, and John to understand that disciples of Jesus will also be called to walk difficult paths. The disciples would also be called by God to speak truth in a world of lies and to defend the vulnerable from the greed of the powerful. The shining light on the mount of transfiguration was almost too bright for their eyes, but it wasn't there to dazzle them. It illuminated the path of discipleship.

MISSING THE POINT

But, like so many students through the centuries, Peter, James and John missed the point. They got so caught up in the glorious light they didn't see what was being illuminated. They were so excited to see biblical celebrities, they forgot who Moses and Elijah really were. Peter blurted out, "It's good that we are here to see this wonderful thing. We are so happy that we are the chosen ones! We can't wait to tell everyone that we saw Moses and Elijah. This is so cool, we will build some huts up here so that we can all sit down and learn about glorious things in heaven. It is so good that we are here, Jesus, we just want to stay here with you."

But then a bright cloud overshadowed them, and they heard the voice of God. Americans always imagine the voice of God sounding like James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman, but we don't know how God sounded to Peter, James, and John. What we are told is that God told them they needed to stop talking nonsense about building booths and staying on the mountain top. God then announced that Jesus was

his Beloved Son. The disciples needed to stop talking and *listen* to what God's Beloved was teaching them.

It was at this point in the story that the disciples were afraid. The transfiguration of Jesus didn't frighten them. The sudden appearance of prophets from ancient times didn't frighten them. It wasn't the miracles or the glory of God that frightened them. It was easy for them to bask in the reflected glory of God. It is easy to worship Jesus and build shrines to Jesus and the prophets. But they fell on their faces in fear when God told them to listen to the Beloved. They were afraid to listen.

LISTEN

Why was this frightening? Because listening means obeying. Listening to Jesus remains one of the hardest things for us Christians to do. We get baptized and go to Sunday School and sing hymns about the glory of God. We have fellowship and take communion and we may even give up chocolate for Lent. But do we *listen* to Jesus?

Do we listen to Jesus when he tells us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us? Not unto some others. Not just unto others who are like us, but all others? Do we *listen* to Jesus when we see people picking up metaphorical stones to hurl at people they call sinners? Or do we join with the crowd and join in heaping contempt on the vulnerable.

Listening to Jesus as the God's Beloved means that we must put away other gods: the gods of war, the golden idols of greed, and the shrines we erect to our own glory. Peter, James, and John learned that it is not easy to be chosen to be a disciple of Jesus. We do not follow Jesus for glory; we follow Jesus out of devotion.

GET UP

Jesus did not leave the three disciples lying there on the ground. He touched them. Throughout the gospels Jesus touched people with a healing touch. Jesus touched blind people, lepers, sinners, and even frightened disciples. He didn't speak to them with anger. He knew they had just had their minds blown. He touched them and gave them strength to stand, strength to stand before him, strength to stand with him, strength to follow him, and strength to be agents of faith and mercy in a violent and sinful world.

Jesus also spoke to them. Get up! The time for fear and hiding is past. You've had our moment on the mountain top and you've heard the voice of God, but the moment is

over. Moses and Elijah have gone back to heaven, but we are still on earth. Get up, Peter, James, and John! You need to go back into the world because the world needs faith, love, and hope. Get up! It is time to show the world what it means to be a disciple of Jesus; what it means to love your neighbor, to protect the vulnerable, and to speak the truth to those who use their power to abuse and destroy. Get up, because the time for fear is past.

When the disciples dared to open their eyes, Jesus was no longer shining like an angel. He was their teacher once again, and he led them down the mountain, back to the slow journey. And they told no one what had happened.

CONCLUSION

Friends, this week we will be entering into the season of Lent, which is a time of self-reflection and confession. It is a time to draw closer to our Lord and walk with him in spirit as he approaches the judgment seat of Pilate and the cross on Golgatha. Lent is a yearly reminder to listen to Christ, to learn from Christ, and to walk with Christ. Lent is not just a time for ashes and giving things up. It is a time to Get Up and follow Christ as our teacher and lord. May each of us become shining examples of Christ's love: prophets who proclaim Christ's truth, and care for the vulnerable.