

Transfiguration Sunday
February 19, 2023

Prelude

*Call to Worship

“Listen to him!” Our God cries from the mountaintop.

It is good for us to be here. We bow before our God in worship.

May God’s Word resonate in our ears and sink into our innermost beings.

May our hearts be transfigured, our minds filled with understanding

*Hymn 1 Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!

Prayer of Confession

God of compassion,

in Jesus Christ you reveal the light of your glory.

But we turn away, distracted by our own plans.

**We confess that we speak when we should listen,
and act when we should wait.**

Forgive our aimless enthusiasms.

Grant us wisdom to live in your light

and to follow in the way of your beloved Son,

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

Though we were blinded by sin,

God’s saving light has been beamed into our hearts

that we may see the radiant mercy of God

in the face of Jesus Christ.

Sisters and brothers, I declare to you, your sins are forgiven. Be at peace. Amen.

Old Testament Reading Exodus 24: 12-18

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Matthew 17:1-9

Morning Message

I slid into a place in the choir loft, not quite late, but not quite on time either.

The woman next to me turns and says, “Cinda, I’m so glad you’re here. I want to ask you something.”

Great. I had kids to get home after church, go over homework, get baths, and tucked into bed. Wednesdays often turned out to be late nights which became grumpy mornings on Thursday if the girls were up too late.

I knew I was in trouble, because a conversation with this person was never quick. But, I stayed after the rehearsal to listen to her concern.

“So, what’s up?”

“Well, I don’t understand the transfiguration. Can you explain it to me? And please don’t say it’s a mystery...or a metaphor. I’ve heard that before and its not very satisfying.”

“It’s a hard one for me, too. That’s why I’m in seminary. I’m hoping to learn. You might ask Dr. So and So.”

“I guess I could do that.” She walked away, disappointed.

Not wanting to be caught flat-footed again, I took a few books from the library, which did provide some background and insight.

We should remember that the gospel of Matthew is written to a Jewish audience. There is a lengthy genealogy in the first chapter which anchors Jesus’ place in Hebrew history. We hear echoes of Old Testament stories. And then, there’s the story of the transfiguration, and it’s more than a hint, more than an echo. We clearly remember Moses up on Mt. Sinai, receiving the law, the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, from God.

It is Elijah and Moses who appear with Jesus, the prophet and the law-giver. It is as though they have come to accompany Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem.

Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus up the mountain. Tension has been building around them. Jesus has a following. People are responding to news of a new way of life, one that shuns strength of oppression and values strength born of the spirit of righteousness and peace.

The trouble was the authorities weren’t having it. It threatened their power. And Jesus and his friends could see around the corner. The next days and weeks ahead were fraught with danger.

And so they begin to look for alternatives, a second opinion, a way to stop time. Here on the mountaintop, they find safety and declare that they will build a sanctuary around themselves, and stay awhile, far from the crowds and the authorities. In that way, they might be spared the heartache to come.

Lent does that to me. True confession time: I love Advent and Christmas and the weeks of Epiphany which call us to prolong the singing of carols and the warmth of candlelight. But, way before I'm ready, Lent steals its way into the calendar and we're headed to Jerusalem all over again.

The inevitability of the cross hangs like a pall over us and we can't do anything about it. So, we pack away the decorations, silence our bright alleluias, dress the sanctuary in solemn purple garb, and pray it doesn't hurt all that much getting to Easter Sunday.

Are any of you Pat Conroy fans? I am, too. Last week I caught the end of "The Great Santini," which is the movie version of the book by the same name. It starred Blythe Danner and Robert Duvall. "The Great Santini" is the name given to Bull Meacham, a decorated fighter pilot in public and a despicable man in private. He inflicted pain upon his family for fun, beating his wife and children, subjecting them to all sorts of hardship, thanks to his alcoholic rages and bullish behavior. And, true to type, Great Santini declared he was cruel and hateful as a demonstration of his love. It was his way of making his family tough in the world. He was so good at convincing them of that, that when he died, his wife ordered her four children to show no emotion, not a tear, at the funeral, as it would be an offense to their father's memory. It should be said that *The Great Santini* was the story of Pat Conroy's own family, his father the famed fighter pilot and household abuser.

We know what this is all about though, don't we? Santini was a deeply wounded human being. We aren't provided his history, but he was a hot mess. He believed it was disgraceful to reveal one's weakness. In fact, he taught his son to prove his strength and courage whenever he was challenged. His version of the golden rule was "do unto others before they do unto you."

"Build a fortress around your soul," he seemed to demand. Do not risk the price of heartache or joy. Criticize, humiliate, reject people before they can reject you. Be tough.

Those aren't kingdom values. Strength and courage are important. But sometimes our strength manifests itself in our vulnerability. Admitting our fear. Accepting hard facts. Facing the future. Railing at God. Yes, even that's ok. God can take it. Even Jesus asked God to change his mind.

God is present in suffering and sacrifice and when we accept that, we find ourselves standing on Holy Ground.

C. S. Lewis writes a final word from Aslan in *The Silver Chair*: “Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it doesn’t confuse your mind. And the signs you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.”

Author Maryetta Anschutz writes, “God prepares people in the transcendent encounters of our lives to endure the world below, the world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is never beyond God’s redemption.

The moment of transfiguration is that point at which God says to the world and to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or sorrow. We cannot build God a monument, and we can’t keep God safe. We also cannot escape the light that God will shed on our path. We cannot escape God, Immanuel among us. God will find us in our homes and in our workplaces. God will find us when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy. God will find us when we run away from God and when we are sitting in what seems like hell. So, get up and do not be afraid.”

Today I might say to my choir buddy that the purpose and meaning of the Transfiguration is that God is at work transforming the world God created, including you and me, day by day and year to year. It is mystery, one of the ways we are reminded that we are all moving toward that day when the “earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9)

*Affirmation of Faith Apostles’ Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer

O Lord, our God,

you are great indeed, clothed in majesty and splendor,
wrapped in light as with a robe.

In the solitude of a mountain height,
you revealed your glory in Jesus Christ
even as he faced his crucifixion.

We praise you for this glimpse of the mystery of our redemption.

Transfigure us by your Spirit,
and let your love shine in all we do and say
that all the world may see the radiance of your light,
Christ Jesus, your Son,

Who guides all creation to the fullness of your glory.

We lift up those in our community of faith, our friends, and family members who are in need of healing and wholeness, all those in need, the forgotten, lost, and abused,

and pray for the coming of your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...Amen.

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

God of grace, you provide for us in more ways than we can know or understand. Accept these offerings as signs of our gratitude and bless them to carry out the ministry of Jesus Christ, that the radiance of his light may transform hearts and minds and wills.

*Hymn 193 Jesus, Take Us to the Mountain

Blessing

Nathan Nettleton, Laughingbird.net

Go now, and speak of what you have seen of God.

Do not cling to the holy moments when heaven overshadows you.

But, as the Lord lives, listen to Christ and follow him from the places of revelation to the places of mission.

And may God shine the light of glory into your hearts.

May Christ be with you and never leave you.

And may the Spirit renew the image of God within you.

*Postlude