



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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Transfiguration Sunday, February 23, 2020

Sermon Title: "Touching Lives"

Gospel Text: Matthew 17:1-9

There is a fancy word for the moment that takes place with Jesus on the mountain. In addition to being called Transfiguration, the word for the experience is called a "theophany." A theophany is an experience of the presence of the Divine. An actual physical encounter or manifestation with the Divine. For many years as we hear this gospel story I confess I have never really quite understood what happens on the mountaintop with Jesus. But, while on retreat recently, I experienced what I think is the closest thing I have ever known to a theophany. As many of you know. I am not one who easily sits and so contemplative prayer can be a challenge for me. Like Peter I would rather be doing things. But on my retreat, I had decided to go to the chapel and try. After remembering my baptism at the font, I sat down, and decided a silent breath prayer would help me- three times at the beginning- breathing in "Thy Will" and out, "Be Done." And then silently the word, "Come."

As I sat in the chapel with my eyes closed I could hear the occasional movement of others at first, before just the stillness of an empty chapel. But then I noticed a bright light shining just above me that expanded. It was not a change in the actual lighting in the chapel. My still-closed eyelids were filled with a light so compelling that I was drawn to lift my head up, as this light radiated the most expansive joy imaginable. I felt completely and totally filled with this light. It was a profoundly beautiful moment that lasted for some time before slowly dimming back to the usual light of the chapel. And then I heard a bubbling sound, the sound of water bubbling in the baptismal font. Bubbling I had not heard before in the chapel, nor would I hear it later. The God of my baptism was speaking just then.

Afterwards I pondered the sheer awe and joy of this presence, thinking that if this is what it means to be in God's presence and glory, why would we ever want to be anywhere else? Like Peter, I could have stayed there forever. This experience transformed how I envision the theophany we call the Transfiguration, in the gospel this day-

Why you wouldn't share it with just anyone to spare yourself from misunderstanding. And why God's voice booming after that moment of glory was so jarring and why the disciples were terrified. Hearing that voice, much less imagining what comes next, would be equally fear producing.

These disciples have worshipped the Jesus who walks on water as the Son of God, and Peter has called him the Christ, but they do not yet imagine what it means for Jesus to claim this identity.

As they head down the mountain, Jesus' followers will be stretched in ways they don't yet grasp- what it means that Jesus embodies God's will amidst humiliation, suffering, and abandonment. And ultimately what it means to stand on another mountain with the resurrected Christ who will send them down, this time to tell everyone-to teach and baptize and to do all Jesus has commanded and done in the world, without his physical presence among them, only their memories and the promised Holy Spirit.

All these years later, what can we bring down the mountain and into the world? The Transfiguration reveals that God is with us. The God who says, "I will be their God and they will be my people," is our God. This God is holy and awesome-filling us with awe, and driving us to humility. This God, perhaps in different ways, breaks through our noise to call us to listen. This God wants to help us to carry out what God calls us to embody in our lives. We can be comforted by God and called to trust that God's vision for all humanity is possible and is our salvation, even when taking up the task of following feels too heavy for us to bear. We are not alone.

For me, the turning point that reveals these things is that amidst all of the cosmic and the confounding, there is a down to earth moment when Jesus approaches his frightened followers and he touches them. He touches them.

How often in our lives when we feel daunted or overwhelmed does someone touching a hand to our shoulder, and telling us not to be afraid, speak compassion and reconnect us for whatever we face? Jesus appears not just as a distant God of glory but a God with skin on who is intimately devoted to us. Though the disciples cannot bear to hear God speak from the cloud, they can listen to Jesus. The manifestation of Jesus as the Christ, the healer and liberator of the world is seen both on the mountain in glory and when Jesus comes to touch the lives of us and others quite literally- in healing, and feeding, and welcoming, and praying, and lifting up. These are the shining moments.

The word of God comes, not as a thunderous voice from heaven, but in the words and actions of Jesus, who embodies God's power and purpose as mercy and love. Then those he encounters can arise and follow him. And so he comes to us.

That day in the chapel for me the main thing I knew was that God loved me, but that baptismal water reminded that God was sending me, still glowing from that encounter. God gave me a well spring to draw upon, for all of the other moments and places into which God would send me.

Our baptismal liturgy tells us we bear God's redeeming love into the world. God does not say we can just stay in the places of glory. In love, Jesus directs us away from trying to understand Jesus only as he is revealed in glory. Like it or not, God points us down the mountain and the light and invites us to walk with Jesus amidst the suffering bringing light and hope. As one writer has said, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." The best thing for us to even begin, is to listen, not to our self-talk, which can be ever present. Listen to Jesus, the God of our baptism.

As we head into the journey of the season of Lent this week, we will walk with Jesus all the way from the mountaintop to the cross.

At Gethsemane, Jesus will face the temptation to disobey his Father and abandon the road to the cross. The same three disciples who saw him transfigured will stop listening. Yet on the cross Jesus will show them and the world the obedient Son of God in all his suffering humanity for the forgiveness of sins. After his resurrection, he will appear to those same disciples, transforming their fears with his grace and peace. On another mountaintop, he will show his divine authority and then call them anew, sending them down the mountain and into the world he loves. Jesus promises them that he will be with them always, not in the flesh but through the Holy Spirit, because God never leaves us but alone. In mysterious and glorious moments of the Spirit and in the loving community like we have here, of beloveds in whom Christ dwells. Fellow Beloveds, from mountaintops, to the valleys and all the in-betweens, we may glimpse fleeting moments of glory but even more, may we remember that we always have the promise of God's presence, love and grace to touch us, transform us and lead us as we follow where Christ goes.

Amen.