

Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday February 26 2017

Matthew 17:1-9

Pastor Alan Bray First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our Light and our Life. Amen

Every year on this Sunday - the last Sunday of Epiphany - we are treated to the larger-than-life story of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. And whether it's Matthew, Mark or Luke, all three versions of the story contain the following elements:

- First, a few days after Peter rebukes Jesus for telling the disciples that he must soon die and be raised from the dead, Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him up a mountain
- There Jesus is transfigured before them...his clothes and appearance become dazzling white
- Suddenly, Moses and Elijah (though dead for centuries) appear and engage with Jesus in conversation
- Peter then babbles nervously, "It's good we're here. Let us make three booths or dwellings for you, Moses and Elijah."
- Immediately, a cloud overshadows all of them
- A voice from the cloud says, "This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him!"
- And with that, the disciples see that only Jesus remains with them
- In the days that follow, the disciples tell no one about what they've seen and heard.

No matter which of the three accounts one reads, it's an amazing story. For those of you who care about such things, on a day like today when the Oscars are being presented, we might well imagine that the Transfiguration of Jesus could be nominated in a number of categories: Best Visual Effects, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Action Short Film, Best Sound Editing, Best Costume Design, Best Cinematography, and Best Supporting Actor...assuming Peter's small speech is as animated as are many of his other outbursts in the Gospels.

Today, as you well know, we are presented with Matthew's account. He has, of course, adapted Mark's earlier version, but Matthew's themes and pre-suppositions add new meaning to the story.

For example, throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is understood to be a new Moses, the new law-giver. Therefore, the appearance of Moses on the mountaintop with Jesus is far more nuanced than in Mark or Luke.

What I most appreciate about Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, however, is what happens immediately after God tells the disciples to listen to Jesus. Now you should know that "Listen to him!" really carries with it the sense of "Understand what Jesus is saying...and make every attempt to live accordingly. Open your ears and live out what you're hearing."

When the disciples heard the voice of God thundering at them, "Listen to him!", they dropped to the ground in fear. I imagine them either fainting or wetting their pants.

But here's the neat thing...and this is unique to Matthew's account of the Transfiguration:

Jesus immediately approaches the disciples, touches them and says to them: "Get up and don't be afraid!" Now if we were to translate that more literally, we would learn that Jesus is using the same verb that the angel uses at the end of Matthew's Gospel to describe Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And so, what Jesus is really saying is, "Be raised! Be raised and have no fear!"

No words of condemnation. No words of rebuke. No words of judgement.

Instead, words of encouragement, words of compassion, words of grace...all accompanied with a tender touch. "Get up, my children...no need to be afraid."

And in response, having heard and understood Christ's renewed invitation into discipleship, the three amigos look up...and they see only Jesus...and immediately, they accompany Jesus back down the mountain, back into the real world, back into the lives of people who hunger and thirst for God's love as experienced in the teaching, preaching and healing ministry of Jesus.

That's not only good news; it's great news...and not only for Peter, James and John...but also for us who have heard God's invitation into discipleship and for whatever reason, have occasionally become fearful and been unable to stand on our own two feet.

I have learned over the years that it does no good to criticize people or cajole them or point the finger of blame at people who turn down an invitation to join a particular committee or who beg off when asked to pray publically or who express fear about serving the church in a particular way. Our world is too full as it is with voices of judgement, condemnation, ridicule and shame. The church does not need to add to this dispiriting cacophony.

What Jesus teaches us in Matthew's Transfiguration story is that he longs to raise people up from the dead places in their lives, encourages them to leave their fears behind, and invites them to accompany Him down the mountain...on a journey toward a new and abundant life.

I'm sure you've already figured out that in Matthew's version of the Transfiguration, we are the ones who are transfigured...you and I...over and over and over again...by a love that just will not quit.

Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen