

Matthew 17:1-9

17Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As 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.”

Why are We Here?

It wasn't until I came here to divinity school that I truly realized how many special liturgical days and seasons there are on the Christian calendar. My husband, Tim, likes to joke, “oh look, it's the 7th week of Methodist Christmas” or “oh look, it's the 10th week of Methodist Pentecost”...and although he's exaggerating and joking, in a way he's right – he and I are both becoming more and more aware of how all time can be related to a season in the church.

Today, as you may know, is Transfiguration Sunday, the last day of the season of Epiphany and final Sunday before Lent. So not only do we commemorate today Jesus' transfiguration on the high mountain which we just read (and sang) about in the gospel passage, but we also are in a time of transition and change ourselves.

All the special days on the Christian calendar, begin to hold so many *liturgical* meanings for me that sometimes their *generic* meaning is easily forgotten, or at least difficult to explain in simple terms. Transfiguration is one such word for me, and so I decided to re-learn it this week. Next to the definitions given concerning the significance of this word in the Christian

church, we also have definitions which explain transfiguring as “changing in outward form or appearance; to transform; to change so as to glorify or exalt” (dictionary.com). And I found these definitions very interesting; each one can allow our understanding of ‘Transfiguration’ to be more dynamic, open up new ways of looking at a familiar story, and help us see how it might be relevant for us today. This is a day, after all, when we claim the importance of commemorating a moment in which Peter, James, and John saw Jesus differently (quite literally). We gather remembering this event through Scripture and tradition, and are left to ask what role our reason and experience have to play in understanding its import for our lives. So I want to ask *you*, many of whom hear sermons on the Transfiguration almost every year, why is such a day important for us as a church? What are we supposed to learn from it? Why, to put it bluntly, are we here?

And questions about the nature of church generally have been crossing my mind a lot lately as I study the history of our denomination in my seminary courses. My classes have shown me that the history of Methodism is a vibrant one, more

spontaneous movement than planned institution, more collective vision than weekly routine. I don't even think institution or routine are bad things— though they have their pitfalls like everything human; but I do know that we as a people of faith do not always remember what we're doing here, in this sort of community and in this sort of institution.

There's a story that describes a Sunday School teacher challenging the children in her class to take some time on Sunday afternoon to write a letter to God. They were to bring their letter back the following Sunday. One little boy wrote, "Dear God, We had a good time at church today. Wish you could have been there" (gospelweb.net).

I know many faithful people who face confusion about the purpose of church. They are dedicated lay members, active on committees, volunteering constantly, and assisting in worship on a regular basis. And yet over the years I have often heard, and sympathized with, their discussions about the limited group of people who would volunteer for these roles. They sometimes began feeling burnt out, and felt the need to take 'vacations' from church in order for it to be meaningful when they returned. And witnessing this experience in the lives of many *faithful* Christians has left some questions in my mind about the nature of the work we are about at church. What are we trying to accomplish? How much of this is purely about institution? How much of this is about our relationship with God?

The passage we have from the gospel of Matthew today comes after a rather climactic build up concerning the identity of Jesus. Chapter 16 has the Pharisees and Sadducees demanding that Jesus show them a sign from heaven to prove that he has authority. After this, Jesus asks his disciples

who they say he is, and Peter makes his famous declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. Chapter 16 ends with Jesus predicting his death and resurrection, and the glory that God will reveal when the Son of Man comes into his kingdom. And now, after all of this questioning, testifying, and prophesying, we come to the transfiguration event. A moment of change, exaltation, and...as if inevitably...human misunderstanding. We should be sure to catch that part of the story...let's listen to it again.

There they stand, Peter, James, John, and Jesus, on the high mountain that Jesus led them up to, and suddenly Jesus is different. He's radiant in appearance, even his clothes change into bright, glorious raiment, and he is accompanied by the great religious figureheads of Judaism – Moses and Elijah – the Law, and the Prophets respectively. And the three are not strangers to one another or competing in one another's presence – Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah, the Scripture tells us – which would be an awesome conversation to hear! But Peter isn't trying to hear their dialogue, and we have no idea what James and John's response is at this moment. As usual, Peter is the only one to speak up, and this is his non-sequitor:

"Lord" he says, "it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Maybe you've heard sermons before on how silly Peter is for recommending that they set up camp with their heavenly visitors. It does seem a strange offer, possibly borne from shock, of the situation, and the recognition that something profound is happening, which calls for some sort of response. It is difficult, however, to know what response could possibly be adequate.

When I was in college, I went to a huge Christian conference with some of my friends. Everyone was excited about being there, and the atmosphere was energizing. There was beautiful music, and many opportunities to go listen to speakers address different mission-themed topics. I remember hearing some amazing sermons, and getting pretty excited about what I could do to be more economically responsible as a consumer. I decided at the end of this conference that I would make all my own clothes from then on. Now, I wish I could stand before you today and tell you that I made any, let alone every piece of my outfit this morning, but as someone who couldn't even sew a button on a jacket at the time of that conference, I made a pretty big stretch when I made that my post-conference goal. You'll be happy to know that *I have* since then learned to sew a few buttons...but unfortunately that's about as far as my sewing skills extend.

I can't help but think that my response to this conference is similar to Peter's response to the Transfiguration in today's gospel passage. Peter articulates the confusion we may also experience when God reveals Godself to us in unexpected ways and in unexpected moments. It is easy for us to get swept away by a moment of spiritual intensity...we make tremendous and well-meant plans that tend to fall through once the feeling wears off. We say things we wouldn't normally say, and perhaps feel strangely about them after the fact. We, as human beings, have a funny way of responding to God's presence, especially when we are not expecting a transfiguring encounter.

We often do not expect it.

And this point brings me back to my question for us earlier – the question, *Why*

are we here? Why do we come week after week, Transfiguration Sunday after Transfiguration Sunday, gathering into the body which we call the church?

Well, I don't think there is just one answer to this question – and I think that's ok. We might all phrase our response to it a bit differently. And that's probably better for our vitality, since we all have unique gifts and personalities with which we can serve God in this place. But even if we all answer the question of why we are here differently, thinking about our reasons for coming, listening to the reasons of others, looking to history for the reasons our mothers and fathers have faithfully gathered *into and as* Church before us can draw us into a transformed relationship with God and with one another. A relationship that *expects* to encounter the holy each time we come together as followers of the one transfigured on the high mountain.

I have experienced the holy many times in this place – it is what happens each time I see new friendships begun or long-time friendships developing between the children in Sunday school and children's church. It happens each time new people volunteer to go with Lane to Central Square and distribute sandwiches to people who are homeless, returning excited and transformed by a ministry of justice and compassion. Experiencing the holy happens when we hear beautiful music from the choir, when we are led into service opportunities by the youth group, and when we lift up one another in prayer during the sharing of joys and concerns. As the hymn goes, "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place," and many of us have experienced God in many other places besides. Nevertheless, our impulse is not to camp out on the pews or to put up tents in the church office. Experiencing the holy is not something we

can generate, or force. In many ways it *is* unexpected...except for the fact that we know that we follow a holy and unpredictable God. It is this God who we recognize as present with us in the Transfigured Jesus. Experiencing the holy as followers of Jesus becomes a possible and present reality in *our* midst at the church when we live into our sense of mission – in other words, our understanding of why we are here.

Taking the text as our guide, then, our mission is twofold. Interrupting Peter's suggestion that the disciples remain on the mountain with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, Matthew's gospel tells us that "suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'" There are two significant parts to this declaration:

1) These are the same words which were spoken by a heavenly voice at the time of Jesus' baptism by John. We are told the identity of Jesus, that he is the Son of God, the Beloved. And so, one priority of this text seems to be that the disciples, and all followers of Jesus, come to know his identity, to know him perhaps in a different, more significant way than they had known him before. They literally see him differently, after all, as he is transfigured before their eyes. Some commentators insightfully suggest that this passage is about the contrast between the very human experiences the disciples shared with Jesus, and the profound testimony to his divinity, often experienced in ways that they found hard to respond to, hard to process and articulate. We are called, just as they were, to know Jesus as fully human among us, but also as God from God, Light from Light.

2) In this declaration, there is also something new that is said. After proclaiming Jesus' identity, the voice adjures, "Listen to him!" Despite his attempts, Peter can't keep Jesus from heading back down the mountain, where, not inconsequentially, all the disciples have been told in the passage right before this one that the crucifixion awaits. The disciples aren't in charge of the agenda here. Their role is to listen. We are in a similar position at this point in the liturgical year. This is the close of Epiphany after all. The joy of Christmas, God's presence with us in the world, is still freshly on our minds. And yet we are running head long into a season of introspection and repentance beginning this Wednesday, and we cannot stop the fact that we will face the betrayal of Holy Thursday and the violence of Good Friday once again – grappling with our relationship to these events, and what they mean for our lives today. These transitions are difficult, and sometimes we don't want to think about these events at the moment that they come up. Can't we set up tents on the mountain instead? It is good for us to be *here*, Peter says.

I found the particular moment when the disciples became afraid in this passage intriguing. It is not when the teacher they have been living with and following for years now changes before their eyes, glowing and new in appearance. As this story is remembered and recounted by the faithful after Jesus' death and resurrection, they do not recall feeling frightened by the fact that Moses and Elijah somehow appear. Both of these events would certainly startle me – and I think as modern readers it is the part we are most skeptical about and surprised by. But the disciples here are not afraid yet. They only feel fear and fall prostrate *after God speaks*, helping them grasp what is actually happening, what they

are actually witnessing and the one whom they follow.

So, we have a pretty good idea of why they, the disciples, were there with Jesus on the mountain. They learn a powerful lesson about Jesus, as we have seen. But we still can ask why we are here today, on this Transfiguration Sunday.

Heirs to this story, we gather as a church professing our faith that God continues to be present with us, showing up in our lives, in our relationships, and also in this community.

We come admitting the difficulty of responding to, sometimes even of remembering God's presence in our lives, and the moments we when we have seen or heard things we still can hardly believe. And yet, we do believe in the holy mystery of such moments, clinging to them because we know that they have changed us. We are here as transformed followers of a transfigured Lord.

And so, as we take what we know about God, and we come seeking to know God

more. We respond to what we have heard from God, and we come in hope and faith that we might hear more. Transfiguration Sunday, if we let it, can be a reminder to us to be attentive to God's holy presence, which has the power to change what we think we know, and to speak to us in ways that helpfully challenge us to grow. It is my hope for each of us that our encounters with the God who appears among us and who was Transfigured before the disciples actually change us.

The words of the closing hymn that we will sing later on today "I want to walk as a child of the Light" has been stuck in my head all week long, and after many hours of humming it and reflecting on its understanding of God, I think the insight it has given me is that we get to the point of desiring to walk as a child of the light as a result of witnessing the holy. Where have we experienced that in our lives? How can we take it with us in all that we do? I pray that we will be transformed by trying. Amen.