

A Mountaintop Experience
Matthew 17:1-9
February 26, 2017 – Transfiguration Sunday

For the past month we've been concentrating on the Sermon on the Mount. We've examined how it can be considered both a call to Christian discipleship and a manual for Christian living. Today we draw our series to a close on another mountaintop. The story of the transfiguration begins with Jesus taking three of his closest disciples, Peter, James and John, and ascending a high mountain. Like many things in the Bible, scholars debate about what mountain this actually was. Tradition since the fourth century says it was Mount Tabor, southwest of Galilee at a height of 1,930 feet. Today there is a Franciscan Church atop Mount Tabor to celebrate the location. Still many modern scholars feel Mount Hermon in the north is much more likely. They cite the combination of its height, 9,232 feet, and its location near Caesarea Philippi where previous events in the Gospel take place. But, with all due respect to the Franciscans atop Mount Tabor, I tell you that geographical location of the transfiguration does not really matter. What matters is the relationship to God.

It's not coincidental that our lectionary pairs the transfiguration with Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai. I mentioned the importance of that statement, "He went up the mountain," when we began our study of the Sermon on the Mount. Mountains have, throughout human history, been the place where people feel a closeness to the deity. This is not just a Judeo-Christian experience. I'm reminded of the number of Greek and Roman temples that are built atop mountains; think of Mount Olympus for example. But here we find Jesus, climbing a mountain with his followers; and when he got to the top, he was transformed; his face shone like the sun.

Anybody here know the story of Moses really well? It's actually ten chapters after the lectionary for today. In Chapter 34 we read:

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. (Ex 34:29-30)

Friends, the transfiguration of Jesus echoes the giving of the law to Moses. Jesus goes up the mountain. His face glows; and he meets there with Moses and Elijah. Moses is the one who brings the law of God to the people; and Elijah is chief among the prophets – the speakers of oracles again echoing the word of God.

Remember the prophets – how many times throughout the Hebrew Bible we hear their admonitions beginning with the words – “Thus says the Lord. . .”

One more important reminder as we look back to the Sermon on the Mount – it’s shortly after the Beatitudes that Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets, I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Matt 5:17) So Jesus holds this high level summit meeting with Moses and Elijah as part of that fulfillment.

But let us not forget Peter, James, and John – the witnesses to the event. They not only saw the transfiguration, as important that that was. Perhaps more importantly, they heard the heavenly voice: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (Matt 17:5) Those words should sound familiar. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”(Matt 3:17) They are the exact same words heard from heaven at the time of Jesus baptism. (By the way, our NRSV translation makes a minor change of pronoun between these two quotes. I’m not sure why they did that. The Greek is exactly the same.) Peter, James, and John have witnessed the glory, the fulfillment and it has been affirmed by the heavenly voice. At the risk of sounding maybe a little trite, I could even say that Peter, James and John have witnesses the love of God truly glowing in the life of God’s only Son. Isn’t that what the law and the prophets are all about – the love of God?

And so, on to my favorite question in all the Bible studies I conduct: So what? So what does the transfiguration of Jesus mean for you and for me some 2000 years later? Friends, I tell you, one of the true blessings of being a pastor is being afforded the opportunity to study and meditate on scripture on a regular basis. I’ve probably preached a dozen sermons on the transfiguration; and I’ve preached several on the Sermon on the Mount; but I have never before seen the tie between the two that I have found in the past weeks.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ instruction to the Christian community, red letter instructions on the Christian life. And here, on another mountain, we have a voice from heaven telling Jesus closest followers, and telling you and me, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” Are we listening? Are we as individuals listening? Are we as a church listening? Are we as a community, a nation, indeed a Christian world listening?

And friends, I tell you that listening means more than simply hearing the words. Listening means action. Listening has to do not just with what we say, but how we live our lives, how we make our decisions, how we spend our money. I’ve heard it said before: if you want to see what kind of Christian someone is, look at their checkbook.

I have an acquaintance by the name of Peter Story. Perhaps you’ve heard of him. Peter Story was the Bishop of the Anglican church in South Africa; and a key

figure in ending South African apartheid. He's also a leading theologian who has written several books. A number of years ago I attended a large church conference in Denver, Colorado. It was centered in one of the large downtown hotels – a beautiful place with luxurious room. I and others from my church stayed in the hosting hotel. Peter Story stayed in a budget hotel out on the edge of town and rode the bus back and forth to the conference, not because he couldn't afford the downtown hotel, but because he could save a few hundred dollars that he would then donate to Africa University.

I remember a fellow student in a Biblical Studies class at John Carroll University – he was a diaconal minister in the Roman Catholic Church. He told me, “Oh, I don't make my kids shop at Goodwill, but we don't buy clothes until they are on sale at Target; and we grow our own vegetables to freeze and can. We save money any way we can – the church needs the money more than I do.”

I need to tell you, while I live a somewhat modest lifestyle; I have a long way to go to meet the standards set by these Christian gentlemen. But, listening to Christ isn't just about money. I continue to be frustrated, maybe even disheartened by people in the corporate world, people in political spheres, and people in everyday society that seem to think that the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not apply to everyday life. Indeed, there are a whole lot of folks out there that aren't listening; and I continue to pray that we as individuals and we as a church are not among the deaf. Indeed, I pray that you and I will take the Sermon on the Mount to heart; that it will become our manual for living; and that, through our living, we will set an example for the world.

But I want to close with another aspect of the transfiguration. You see, Jesus was transfigured. Moses was transfigured; and I believe that, as we seek to be one with Christ, as we seek to come every closer to the goal of Christian perfection, we too can experience transfiguration.

As I was writing this sermon, a song popped into my head. I don't know why; but, when the Spirit speaks, I try to listen. I think this is the first song I ever learned. I remember my mother teaching it to me when I was a preschooler. No, it wasn't “Jesus Loves Me.” I learned that sometime along the way in Sunday School. I'm not even sure if I would classify this song as sacred or secular; but I remember it; and I suspect I'll be singing it on my deathbed:

Just let the sun shine in, face it with a grin;
smilers never lose; and frowners never win;
so let the sun shine in, face it with a grin;
open up your heart and let the sun shine in.

We're told that Moses' face was shining. We're told that Jesus' face shined like the sun. Friends, there's a call in that, a call to open our hearts to the glory of almighty God. You see, the people I have know; and I suspect the people you have known, who have truly opened their hearts to the glory of God are smilers. They truly radiate the love of God. There's that word again – "radiate." They are so full of the love of God, that the love pours off of them, as if they shined like the sun.

Yes, there are two calls in the story of the transfiguration: the first is a call to listen, to lead our lives in accord with the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ; but the second call is a call to shine, to radiate agape love to all the world, in our thoughts, in our words, and in our actions. May it be so.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
Teach us to listen to the Good News of your amazing love.
Open our hearts and fill us with that love.
Let the love pour off of us that others might also know the Good News.
This we pray in Christ's holy name. Amen.

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