

Sunday Sermon
February 26, 2017
“Transformed”
Matthew 17:1-9

Introduction

Floyd was a member of the first church I pastored, a church in the mountains of Tennessee. Only Floyd never came to church.

Folks inferred he had a drinking problem. And it was true that corn did not grow too well on those rocky tops, and many folks in the community kept their corn in a jar. Folks would smile and say with a wink that Floyd had a “religious experience” once when he was up on the mountain at a place called the Beauty Spot.

I went to visit Floyd, and he told me about the time he saw Jesus. He was alone on the mountain working, most likely with corn. Suddenly there was a bright, almost blinding light. He fell on his knees, and there in front of him was Jesus.

I did not question Floyd. I did not laugh. I did not even give a doubting or skeptical look. But I wanted to, and to myself I wondered. Because we always wonder.

I

Jesus, approaching the conclusion of his earthly ministry, has turned toward Jerusalem, where he knows he is going to suffer and die. Perhaps troubled, perhaps exhausted, perhaps fearful, Jesus takes disciples Peter, James and John and goes up on a mountain to pray. Other times Jesus went to a mountain to pray when burdened.

On the mountaintop, something extraordinary happens. Right before the disciples’ eyes, Jesus is changed, transfigured. His face shines like the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white. And Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the great prophet, are standing there with him.

It is a mountaintop experience. For a brief moment, the ordinary, the mundane is peeled back; and the disciples see Jesus in his glory, the one of God sent from God. They hear a voice, “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.”

Theopanies, that is visions of God, are few and far between. Most of us spend most of our lives wishing for an encounter like the one the disciples had up on the mountain. And yet I wonder, do we really expect such? And if we did encounter God in such a way, would we understand what we experienced?

Peter does not understand. Peter says, “Let’s build three dwellings up here on this mountain, Jesus, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. And let’s stay up here and worship and praise God.”

We are Peter. We want to stay on the mountain in the thin places where we feel closer to God. That is why mountain property is so expensive. But Jesus does not stay there. He gets the disciples up and leads them back down the mountain, to the world below.

I went to the visitor's center to learn about this area, and Ed Phillips gave me a CD of *Songs from Burke County*. The songs tell interesting stories. The best one, of course, is the song called "Call Your Senator Sam." Then there is one that says "Let's go to Table Rock and see the wildflowers and the beauty of the Gorge." And then there is a pretty but rather somber song about going to the valley at the foot of the mountain to a place called Fonta Flora. "I go back to Fonta Flora," the singer says, "back to the life I left behind. I go back to Fonta Flora, but only in my mind."

Keep reading in this chapter in Matthew, and you see that when Jesus and the disciples go down from the Mount of Transfiguration, waiting for them is a father with a young boy seized with epilepsy. Earlier, the disciples had not been able to cure the boy, but Jesus heals him, and then Jesus turns to continue on his way to Jerusalem.

For the sake of that young boy, for our sakes, Jesus does not stay up on the mountain. Jesus comes down the mountain to be with us in our suffering, to offer us healing, to take our deaths upon him, and to touch our lives with God's glory.

II

On the way down the mountain with the disciples, Jesus gives them an order. It has been said that the first half of that order is the command of Jesus most obeyed by Presbyterians: "Do not tell anyone what you have seen. Share with no one what you have experienced."

We are so reluctant to share from spiritual experiences. We do not want people to question or wonder about us. We forget the second half of the command, "Do not tell anyone . . . until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." You see, the disciples have only received a glimpse of the glory. Jesus knows they have to face the suffering and death of the cross before they can truly know the transforming triumph that comes with the resurrection.

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the forty days and six Sundays of Lent, that purple season of reflection and repentance. Do not miss this holy day. Come back Wednesday evening and receive ashes and remember, "We are dust, and to dust we shall return." We live in a sinful, mortal world; we are sinful, mortal.

Our faith is a source of great comfort. But the comfort does not come until we face the pain of being mortal and acknowledge that we are going to die. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross said, "Until you face your own mortality you cannot truly live." Such is the task of Lent.

So today at the close of the service, our children will come and lead us in the ancient practice of packing away our alleluias. It is solemn; it is somber, and I never want to do it. I want to stay on the mountain and sing “Alleluia,” Hebrew for “Praise the Lord,” every Sunday. I want to leave each week with Alleluias ringing in our heads.

But we are giving up Alleluia for Lent. For the next six Sundays, we are not going to sing or say the word, so that when we hear Alleluia again on Easter morning, it will indeed be a celebration. For if we have done the work of Lent these next six weeks, facing our mortality and sinfulness, then we will give Alleluia praise that, through Christ’s death and resurrection, God has made us more than dust.

Conclusion

You know, Floyd began coming to services at our church in the mountains. And I began to notice something: The more Floyd became involved in the life of the church and the people of the community, the less I wondered about his mountaintop experience.

I believe it when Matthew says that Jesus was up on the side of a mountain praying, and Moses and Elijah came and stood with him, and he was transformed. I believe that it really happened.

And what is more, I believe it can happen to us. That we can be those who are transformed, given a new sense of hope, a new sense of life. The disciples never forgot what they saw on the mountain. It changed them and the way they would face the disappointments, the frustrations, and the persecutions that lay ahead.

Our holy moments spent with Jesus in prayer and worship will transform the way we face the challenges of our lives as well.

We usually think of the Transfiguration as something that happened to Jesus. This Lent, do we dare think of transfiguration as something that can happen to us?