

Matthew 17:1-9 – The Transfiguration

On this final Sunday in the season of Epiphany, we end, as we always do, with the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. Today, we get Matthew's version of this story. This whole section of Matthew's Gospel, as it draws nearer and nearer to the betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus, revolves around human expectations versus God's reality. In this section, the ultimately limited and dim expectations of humans are subverted by the realities of what God is doing in the world. Those first few disciples struggled, as we ourselves often do, to see what God was up to, to let go of their own hopes and fears and to make space to see and appreciate what God was already doing in their midst.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus takes his closest friends, Peter and the brothers James and John, and together they ascend a nearby mountain. When they arrive at the top, the men are met with a miraculous sight: Jesus, their teacher and friend, glowing a radiant, dazzling white, and conversing with two of the greatest prophets in Israel's history, Moses and Elijah.

Peter, sensing something extraordinary is happening in front of him, attempts, valiantly, to enter the moment by offering to be helpful, to build three tents or dwelling places for Jesus and his heavenly visitors. Peter is so wonderfully human in this scene. Matthew isn't quite as harsh to Peter as Mark and Luke are, who both state that Peter has no idea what he's doing or what to say. But Matthew still portrays Peter's ultimately doomed attempt to understand the scene playing out in front of him. Peter's limited human understanding gives us a nice entryway into this story. What exactly is happening in the story of the Transfiguration is one theologians have debated for a long time, and Peter's bumbling attempt to put words to the miraculous

actions of God reminds us that even the most learned people, the most holy people can come up short when faced with the wonderful deeds of God.

Our lectionary this week does not do us much favor, either, as we seek to understand the Transfiguration. So much of the significance of this story is shaped by the events that lead up to it, the part that we don't get to hear in today's Gospel reading. In the chapter immediately preceding this one, chapter 16, Peter, prompted by Jesus and filled with divinely-inspired knowledge, will name Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. It's an astounding moment for Peter, one guided by deep faith and trust in Jesus. In response, Jesus will name Peter as the future head of the Church. But Jesus isn't finished with his future predictions. He will go on to tell those faithful, awed disciples the true mission of the Messiah: that in such a short time, he will go on to face shame, betrayal, suffering, and death before God's glorious reign will be fully revealed. Understandably, the disciples, especially Peter, are shocked at Jesus' prediction, horrified to learn about the fate that awaits their friend, but also stunned to learn that this is the mission the Messiah came to fulfill. It's not what they want to happen, not what they expected to happen, not what they signed up for when Jesus called them out of their quiet lives as fishermen and into ministry.

Naming Jesus as the Messiah was a big moment for the disciples, but it was also a moment that came with consequences for those first few followers. Now, they must attempt to marry their expectations of who and what the prophesied and awaited Messiah would be like with the reality of who Jesus really is. And if their reaction is any indication, the disparate ideas are hard for them to comprehend. How can they reconcile their hopes for the powerful, glorious,

conquering Messiah with the reality of the suffering, bleeding, dying servant Jesus is revealing himself to be?

And so we come back to the story of the Transfiguration, happening just a few verses after the naming of Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus' first Passion prediction. It's this chasm between expectation and reality that must surely have been playing in the minds of Peter, James, and John as they see Jesus transformed in front of them, glowing a dazzling white and conversing with Moses and Elijah. Though the disciples have just learned the awful truth about where this ministry of love, healing, care, and joy is headed, it does nothing to diminish the reality of who Jesus really is. Jesus will suffer for the sake of the world, and that terrible truth only serves to enhance his ministry, and gives us new imagination, new understanding for who God is, what God is doing in the world, and how very much God loves us.

In the story of the Transfiguration, we see the full power of God to transform, not only Jesus, but the whole of creation, not because God met human expectations, but because God is bigger than them. Once upon a time, God looked out over the formless void of the universe, and dreamed all of *this* into being, all the wildness and beauty and glory of creation. And God looked out on everything God had made and called it Good. All the plants and planets and people, you and me, we are all a product of the gorgeous, glorious imagination of God.

And, of course, we know how the story goes, we invite sin and death and corruption and ruin into the picture with human greed and selfishness. Our imagination, our expectations of what could and should be fall so very short of God's. But God keeps transforming anyway, keeps working to take the things we corrupt and make them into something new and good and whole

again. God invites all those who would be followers into the work of reclaiming, redeeming, transforming creation, too.

Friends, I always like to deliver the bad news first, so here it is: the sad reality is that we live in a spectacularly imperfect world. You've read the news, you've known pain and grief and suffering, both in the world and in your own lives. No matter how hard we try to ignore or deny or circumvent it, none of us are ever fully exempt from suffering.

But now for the Good News: God has promised to make all things right, to redeem the world. In his book *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu talks about how the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain all those years ago continues to color and shape our world today. "The principle of transfiguration," says Tutu, "says that nothing, no one and no situation is 'untransfigurable,' that the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God." The world that God imagined and created and called Good all those years ago still exists, though it's been covered over and colored with all manner of sin and death and decay. God invites us to adjust our own imagination, our own expectations and look out at the world focused less on what it is, and more on what it could be. God is at work transforming, transfiguring the world, and God is always inviting us into that work, too, to look at what is and know that it is not yet what it could be.

Desmond Tutu continues his writings on what God is doing in the world, saying: "All over this magnificent world God calls us to extend God's kingdom of shalom – peace and wholeness – of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, of joy, and

of reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment *through us* because God *believes in us* and because God *loves us*.”

In the transfiguration, the disciples see the glory of Jesus, not diminished by the reality of his imminent suffering, but enhanced by it. In the end, Jesus will choose to suffer *because* he loves the world so much, because nothing will stop God from transforming, transfiguring all of creation. As we partner with God in this work, we are reminded that we are not limited by our own expectations, but are instead invited into God’s divine imagination, to dream with God about what can and will be.