

Matthew 17:1-9
2 Peter 1:16-21
“Prophets of the Spirit”

February 23, 2020
Rev. David Pierce

Today is what the church calendar calls Transfiguration Sunday. Just so we're clear, when something is transfigured it means it is completely altered from the inside out, reconfigured through and through. Whatever was there before, isn't there now. Whatever appearances, whatever ways of thinking and being, it's all now up for grabs. All bets are off, anything can, and likely will, happen. I want to make sure we're all clear about this, about what happens on Transfiguration Sunday, because it would be easy to think nothing is going to change today. I'm pretty sure that as we sit here today, the walls are not going to suddenly come down, the world outside is not going to suddenly be reconfigured into a place of abundant food and peace for all, we are not going to suddenly find our bills have been paid and our children all made safe for life, we are not going to suddenly discover it is November 5th and another presidential election has come and gone with barely any notice at all. No, I'm pretty sure, in short order, we're going to go out of here pretty much the same way we came in.

And yet, today is Transfiguration Sunday. According to Matthew, this is the day when Jesus went up a mountain with Peter, James, and John, and right there before their very eyes he was transfigured. Everything about him—his clothes, his hair, his face—got a total makeover. It's still Jesus, but he looks like the sun, if anyone could ever get close enough to the sun to see what the sun looks like. What is more, along with Jesus, Moses and Elijah—two guys who have been dead for a millennium—also appear, and not as skeletons. The fact that Peter recognizes them as Moses and Elijah tells us that they too have been transfigured. Of course, the moment is so awesome, so unbelievable, that Peter wants to freeze it in time. “Jesus, let's stay up here for a while. I'll put up some tents for you, Moses, and Elijah to stay in, that way you'll be protected from the elements.”

It's like a bride on her wedding day when it's pouring rain outside. She gets out of the limo under a dozen umbrellas and shuffles into the church as fast as she can, before her dress

can get wet or her make-up can run. That's what Peter has on his mind. "We don't want to ruin this moment. It's perfect just the way it is. Jesus, let me put up a tent for you."

I suppose Peter has good reason to want to keep Jesus right where he is, as he is. For Matthew tells us this is all happening six days later. Which begs the question, what happened six days ago? Six days ago, Jesus and his disciples had just come off a long stretch of ministry. Long lines of hungry people looking for a morsel, and the disciples got nothing, and Jesus tells them to feed the people anyway. "Jesus, can't we send the people away, or maybe go away ourselves?" "No, you feed them, for it is better that all have some than for some to have all." It was a lesson in humility, in faith, and in what can happen when we put equality ahead of abundance. In the same line that day were also people who couldn't walk, talk, see, hear, or use their bodies and minds in any way considered useful to the world. "Jesus, we can't do anything for them. It's embarrassing. Send them away." And Jesus, who wants to show that we can do the most for one another by simply drawing close enough to touch one another, says, "No, bring them to me."

It had been a tough week for the disciples. Everywhere they turned, they felt inadequate and not at all up to the task. To make matters worse, Jesus seemed intent on doing the work anyway, or at least in trying to. "Bring them to me."

"Yes, but what about us Jesus?" the disciples would ask. "When are we going to get some alone time with you? We've been following you a lot longer than any of those crowds have, and we have needs, too, and all this ministry we've been doing wasn't exactly our idea."

Then, six days ago, Jesus announced he had a plan. "We've got to go to Jerusalem."

"No, not Jerusalem, Jesus. That's just more crowds, more tired. And besides, who ever said we've got to do anything?"

"I do. We've got to go to Jerusalem where I will endure great suffering at the hands of the religious authorities, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

This was a plan that would involve change and transfiguration, great transfiguration. The man who up until now has been seen as a gentle healer, who has been saving people from death, is about to die himself. And as anyone who has ever suffered through dying knows, it changes us. It can certainly be said that in death the body moves from a place of independence to dependence, as we nearly return to the way we were at the beginning when we were babies in need of feeding, diapering, cuddling. In dying, we learn what it is once more to be held by friends and family, until at last we are held once again only by the merciful hands of God.

In dying, our thoughts change as they go from certainty to mystery. We find ourselves questioning why certain things happen, and what is going to happen next, and we struggle to grab hold of whatever certainty there is in faith. And lest we think these changes happen only to the dying, they happen also to their loved ones. Look at any parent who has sat beside the bed of a terminally ill child, or any spouse who has cared for an aging husband or wife. On the far side of death, even the living look 10 years older. Listen to their voice crack as they say thank you to a neighbor who has dropped off yet another casserole, and see the toll dying can take on us all.

“Not Jerusalem,” say the disciples, “not dying, not change.” “We must,” Jesus insists. “If anyone wants to be my disciples they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and die with me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. It’s the only way.”

It’s no wonder then that Peter wants to set up a tent for Jesus on a mountain. For six days now they’ve been walking towards Jerusalem on what feels like a suicide mission. If Peter is going to stop this craziness, he must act now to contain it. “We can just stay up here until the wind blows over. No one has to know where we are.”

Everyone’s got to have a way to keep the lid on when we reach boiling point. How do you work it? In Luke’s version of the story, Peter doesn’t think to put up any tent until after he’s first nodded off to sleep. He’s tired, I’m sure, from a long week of ministry, though I

also have to wonder if he isn't hoping he can just sleep this whole thing off. "I'm going to close my eyes for a few minutes. When I wake up, I'm hoping this whole bit about a cross and Jerusalem will have just worked itself out." Instead he wakes up to see Jesus with Moses and Elijah saying, "Time to go."

The whole reason Moses and Elijah show up on the scene, of course, is because they are two guys who know how not to be afraid of what happens on the mountain, for they have been up and down a few mountains in their own lifetime. Back in Exodus chapter 3, Moses went up Mount Horeb to see a bush that, though on fire, did not burn up, and out of this burning bush God spoke. "Moses, I have heard the cries of my people in bondage. I'm sending you back to Egypt to tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.'" And though Moses had a thousand reasons not to go, though he feared for his own life, though he must have wondered at the ridiculousness of God to speak out of a burning bush, the writer of Exodus says that the compassion of God ran deep in the heart of Moses, so down the mountain he went.

In 1 Kings chapter 18, Elijah, like Moses, goes toe to toe with the powers of greed and exploitation when he goes alone up Mount Carmel to face off against the prophets of Baal. The prophets of Baal represented the Canaanites in the Old Testament. Known for their belief in many gods, the Canaanites were also a warring people who were not afraid to use whatever means necessary to kill their enemies, from cutting off food supplies to create starvation, to pulling out the sword. When, however, a severe drought strikes the land and no one, not even the Canaanites, can grow any food to survive, Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to see which of their gods will save them. "Let us build an altar, and put upon it a sacrifice, and then each of us will call upon our god to come and light a fire upon it."

So the prophets of Baal brought a bull and placed it upon the altar, and they called to their gods, but there was no answer. "Maybe you need to call louder," said Elijah, "for perhaps your gods have fallen down on the job." So the prophets of Baal called louder, but still they got no answer.

Then Elijah stepped to the altar. He asked for 8 large jars of water to be brought and poured over the bull, so much water that it fell over the sides of the altar and soaked the ground beneath it. Then Elijah called to the God of Israel, the God of loving-kindness to come and burn up the altar with fire. And when there was only ash and smoke remaining, Elijah went down the mountain.

Time and again history tells the story of people who went up the mountain to find God, and came down the mountain to find a world reborn. These people were prophets of the Spirit, people whose actions by the standards of this world made no earthly sense. But they heard the voice of God, they felt the Spirit moving, and they went down the mountain to find a world reborn.

On this last Sunday of Black History Month in our country, I can't help but think of Martin Luther King Jr. who, in his final speech ever given, said, "I have been to the mountaintop." What's worth noting, perhaps, is that he wasn't standing in Jerusalem or Egypt when he said it. He wasn't in Greece with Aristotle and Plato, or in Washington with Lincoln and Roosevelt. He wasn't on a beach in the Caribbean, he wasn't surrounded by his family and friends. He was in Memphis, Tennessee at the height of civil unrest and black segregation in our country. He was advocating for fair wages and a better economy on behalf of 1300 sanitation workers who weren't getting their fair shot in life, and he said, "I have been to the mountaintop." For I have seen what happens when men and women straighten up their backs and get to work for justice. I have seen what happens when brothers and sisters judge one another not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have seen what happens when a nation rallies to the cry for freedom on behalf of the least. Yes, I have been the mountaintop.

"And I don't mind," he said. "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And God's allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land, and I believe that we as a people will get there."

As we know, the next day, he was shot dead on the balcony of his motel.

Matthew says it was six days later when Jesus told Peter, James, and John, "It's time to go down the mountain and get to Jerusalem." They of course didn't want to go. "Jesus, can't we just stay up here? I mean, no one says anymore, 'Let's go to Jerusalem.'" And he looked at them and said, "I do, I do."

It was six days later. Go figure, that's the exact number of days it's been since you and I were last together in this place. I guess it's time for us to get a move on.