

The Mountaintops and Valleys of Life

Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

Matthew 17:1-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Fifteen years ago, on Easter Sunday of 2008, this community of faith heard me preach my first sermon as your pastor. However, if you were around back then that wasn't the first sermon you heard me preach. That occasion was six weeks earlier when I stood behind this pulpit to deliver my candidating sermon, after which there was a Congregation Meeting in order to vote on whether to extend a call to me to be your next pastor.

Following the assigned lectionary Gospel passage for that particular Sunday, wouldn't you know I had to preach on Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, which is always designated each year as the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. I began by commenting on how I would have preferred to *not* have to preach on this rather bizaare story on such an auspicious occasion. In looking back this week on that sermon, I was pleasantly surprized to realize it wasn't that bad, especially given how my own theological understanding has become more and more progressive over the years.

To quote myself, I mentioned, **"It does provide an opportunity, however, to share my understanding of responsible biblical interpretation, which is important for you to know about."** I explained it this way, "This is one of many biblical stories that has been a stumbling block for lots of folks, primarily over the question: **Did it really happen in a literal way?**" In these intervening years, I've found myself continuing to bring up that same question concerning any number of biblical stories, especially the ones so many progressives now find impossible to consider on the level of literal historical fact.

To explain the importance of that question, I'll quote once again from that sermon 15 years ago. "Let me answer that, in part, this way. In 2001, **Marcus Borg**, a biblical scholar, Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, and active member of the Jesus Seminar, wrote an informative and invaluable book entitled, **Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally**. In his 2003 book, **The Heart of Christianity**, Borg states that many of the stories that biblical literalists interpret as hard and fast historical fact were actually intentionally written using metaphorical language – thus never intended to be taken literally. Borg writes, **"Yet as metaphorical narratives, they can be profoundly true, even though not literally factual"** (pg. 50)." And I added back then, "I couldn't agree more." I still agree!

Well, as you can see, all these years later this has once again been a rather lengthy introduction before actually getting into the nitty gritty of The Transfiguration story. I decided, however, that it may be important for all those who have joined this

community of faith more recently, and especially for any visitors, to know our basic approach to interpreting scripture here at College Hill. By the way, after that sermon in 2008, entitled, *“Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There”*, I didn’t preach again on The Transfiguration until 2016. And it has been four years since the last time.

This story was obviously important to the early church because it is recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Though not identical, all versions are quite similar. Here’s a quick review. Jesus goes up an unnamed mountain with Peter, James and his brother John. As Jesus is praying he is somehow transformed. In the original Greek language of the gospel, the root of the word used for “transfigured” is also used for our word metamorphosis. The appearance of Jesus’ face changes. It shone like the sun, as did Moses’ face when he came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments after being in the Divine Presence of Yahweh – God. Jesus’ clothes also became a dazzling white.

Suddenly, standing next to Jesus and talking with him are Moses (the great Lawgiver) and Elijah (the great Prophet). This reveals how Jesus is indeed a continuation of these two great traditions in Israel’s faith – the law and the prophets. Peter quickly offers to build three dwelling places for them. This is so they all can stay up on the mountaintop and prolong their spiritual experience. He is interrupted, however, when a cloud mysteriously comes and overshadows the terrified disciples. Echoing the same words heard at Jesus’ baptism, a voice calls out from the cloud, **“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.”** Yet on this occasion a command is added, **“listen to him!”** The three disciples fall to the ground and are overcome by fear. Jesus touches them, tells them to get up, and speaks the familiar biblical words often spoken to someone who encounters an epiphany of the Divine, “do not be afraid.” Just as suddenly, the disciples look up and see no one except Jesus himself alone. Then, the three disciples are told to not share this experience with anyone.

Crucial to a fuller interpretation of this Transfiguration story is what happens next. When they all come down the mountain they immediately encounter a person who asks for a healing miracle for his daughter. That leads to a point I often make concerning one of the meanings of this story. **After a profound mountaintop experience, which the disciples wish to hold onto, they go right back down to the valley (the level place) where life is lived, the place where there is ministry to do.**

Occasionally, you and I are blessed with a wondrously unexplainable spiritual experience when we sense that we have closely felt we have been in the Sacred Presence of the Divine. Yet, Jesus basically tells the disciples – and us – that **we can’t stay up on the mountaintop, that we must move on. We must get back down to the valley where the world needs us.**

Though often associated with specific geographical locations, like a real mountaintop or a place like a camp retreat or somewhere out in nature, a **“thin place”** is anywhere and anytime the perceived distance between the material and the spiritual is so small it can be touched. **If we’ve learned anything from Celtic spirituality, it is that any place – even in the valleys and trenches of life – can become a “thin place” where we encounter and experience God’s Presence. There are indeed revelations, epiphanies, and moments of transfiguration in the commonplace.** It doesn’t take long to realize, however, that special “God moments” are all too quickly followed by “real life.” That’s the routine, ordinary, day-to-day life that we experience where life is lived.

There’s one additional point I’d like for us to consider. Returning to the story itself, it’s interesting that after the words, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well

pleased," comes **the only recorded command in the New Testament that is spoken directly by God to humans.** God adds, "**Listen to him!**" These words, "Listen to him" direct us to the understanding that being a follower of the ways and teachings of Jesus means **not only watching and doing what Jesus does, we are to also stop and listen to what Jesus says.**

How well do you and I really listen to Jesus? How well do we listen together as a community of faith? Unlike Peter, who felt he had to immediately *do* something after experiencing the Presence of God, we are reminded that **sometimes the best response is to simply stop, look, and stand in awe.** Yes, there is a time to act – we talk about that on a weekly basis. This congregation and its members are well known for emphasizing the need to put our faith into action. Saying that, **there is also a time for us doers to pause in humble reverence when we recognize that we are in the Sacred Presence of the Divine** – which by the way, we always are, whether we experience that or not. **Reverence, I believe, is something we progressives must reclaim, yet not in its often understood fundamentalist way.**

All this is to say, "*Don't Just Do Something, Stand There.*" Therefore, whether we find ourselves on the mountain or in the valley, we are to be *transformed* by the Presence of God among us and within us. And I would add, transformed by being in the presence of each other. I'll close this sermon with the words from that first one 15 years ago.

I hope we have many years ahead when together we both stand in awe on the mountaintop, listening to Jesus, and go forth into the valley, empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the ministry to which God is calling us this day and in the future.

Amen.