

Sermon – February 23, 2020

Be Transformed!

Text: Matthew 17: 1-9

Every year, just before the beginning of Lent, the church goes mountain climbing. The congregation that gathered up on the mountain with the Rev. Jesus that day is a small one. Only 5 were present. Peter, James and John are regulars. They never miss. And today we have two visitors who haven't attended a worship service on earth in centuries. Neither Peter, James nor John had ever met these men before. Yet even without the customary, "passing of the peace," they know their names. Moses and Elijah - two giants of faith - and they're talking with Jesus. Quite impressive. Mountains, you may well know, in Greek, Hebrew, Roman and Asian religious literatures, were always places where the human could touch the divine. Sure enough, on top of that mountain, a wonderful thing happened. Jesus' appearance changes—his clothes became dazzling white and he actually glows. I confess I've been puzzled over transfiguration and how to bring this particular story alive. This is something out of the ordinary.

On top of the mountain, Peter is so impressed by what he has seen- the marvelous light of the face of Jesus - he is so awed by the light, that he wants to set up permanent booths or memorials and make an idol of the moment. Peter attempts to build some dwellings for Moses, Elijah and Jesus - to capture that moment and immortalize it, hoping to make it last forever. Peter was opting for a religion of temples, brick and mortar, institutions and shrines. And before Peter could even finish speaking, God, through a voice out of the cloud interrupted and said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" These very words were the same pronouncements we hear at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. Marcus Borg succinctly puts it: "Jesus in that moment becomes a metaphor of God – he is the heart of God made flesh".

The three disciples, fell to the ground and were overcome with fear. But they began to see Jesus in a new way. They got a brand-new insight into whom this Jesus really was -- dazzling, overwhelming, literally enlightening. If they were confused before, now they get it! It was a moment of revelation – an "aha" moment if you wish. Matthew tells this story to remind

us that whatever else we think of Jesus, and no matter how we feel about these coming weeks of Lent, when we focus on his journey toward death, there was, in his life, a radiant truth of his person and character; that Jesus is about transforming lives!

Why do we climb this mountain every year to see this transfigured appearance of Jesus? Don't we have enough to do down here in the plains? Aren't there jobs to be done? bills to be paid? children to be fed and clothed? sick to be healed? grievors to be consoled? Why does Jesus take this time away from the plains to go mountain-climbing? Why do we?

We climb the mountain of Transfiguration each year for the same reason John Denver puts these lyrics in a song called *The Eagle and the Hawk*: "Come dance with the west wind, and touch on the mountaintops. Sail o'er the canyons, and up to the stars. And reach for the heavens, and hope for the future, and all that we can be, not what we are." All that we can be - not what we are. Jesus shone with the glory that caused old Moses to shine that day on the mountain of Sinai, when the 10 commandments were given to him. Jesus shone with the glory that carried old Elijah up to heaven's heights - gone from this world - but alive in the memory of those who followed his teachings. All that we can be - not what we are.

The word *transfiguration* in Greek is *metamorphosis* which is about change. It literally means to transform in outward appearance. Jesus appears in dazzling light - in a dream-like space talking with those who lived centuries before. *Transfiguration* is about change, but it emphasizes a dramatic change in *appearance*, and especially it means a change from the ordinary to extraordinary. One preacher defines transfiguration as a transformation of sight and heart, of the disciples and of us. I like this definition. Through the transfigured state of Jesus, we are given new eyes, new heart and new ways of being.

Just when the three disciples were enjoying their "peak" moments, Jesus brushes off the sleeves of his garment and says, "Guys, it's time to go. Roll up your sleeping bags. Our camping is over. Let's get down to work!" Work? What work? Where? Jesus himself does not want to stay up on the mountain forever. He had to come back *down* to the plains. Jesus comes back down where real transformation takes place. Not in the high places but down in the plain. Down into the mundane nature of everyday life. Down into the nitty-gritty details of

misunderstanding, squabbling, disbelieving people. Down into the religious and political quarrels of the day. Down into the jealousies and heartaches that colour our relationships. Down into the poverty and pain that are part and parcel of our life in this world. Down. Jesus came down. He asks his disciples to roll up their sleeves and get down to work. He showed them how to heal the sick. He led them down to the bottom of that mountain to the hurting people, unbelieving religious and political leaders, the bureaucratic institutions and the realities of suffering below. Through this puzzling event called transfiguration, Jesus has set the example that true religion is not about building temples and keeping shrines. It is about healing hurts, speaking for and being with the poor, the helpless, the voiceless and the forgotten who are at the silent bottom of every pinnacle, every hierarchy and every power. True religion, is not about transcending life; it is about transforming life.

With Jesus it becomes clear that, we, too, are meant to be transformed. We, too, are to wear robes that shine with Jesus' presence in our lives. We are to wear the robes of love and compassion, garments of justice and peace. Moments of transfiguration transform us, sustain us, prepare us, encourage us, and guide us into the many life circumstances we face. We are transfigured people. Open your eyes and see a transfigured world. Open your ears and hear the transfiguring voice. Open your heart and become a transfigured life. Be transformed! Thanks to be to God. Amen.