

EXODUS 24:12-18

PSALM 99

II PETER 1:16-21

MATTHEW 17:1-9

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany; Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Transfiguration of the Lord

February 19, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Good to Be Here!

We often talk of mountaintop experiences! We all long for mountaintop experiences! One beer commercial proudly invites us to “head for the mountains” naming their beer as the pinnacle of a brewer’s delight. The biblical narrative is full of references to mountains, to mountaintops, and mountain peaks, the mythology of these lofty venues above the clouds offering a host of spiritually enhanced images. We read sacred stories from the Hebrew Bible describing the mysteries surrounding Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai, sacred locations believed to be the home of God, a divine presence first revealed as the great I AM in a bush that burned but did not, amazingly was not consumed, not even singed in the slightest. These epic summits were the hills from whence the ancient Psalmist’s eyes looked, seeking the help of the Holy, the source of comfort and compassion, worship and revelation. The Samaritans worshipped at Mt. Gerizim, a different mountain but a mountain, nonetheless. Yes, this became a major sticking point of contention between the Jews of Jesus’ day and the Samaritans. Traditional Jews looked down, frowned on this proud people they considered inferior, snubbed, because of their purported half breed status. Of course, Jesus never looked down on this people or any other people, seeing the beauty of the Divine imbued within each person, defending and affirming everyone, never snubbing his nose at anybody.

Today, we read a short excerpt from the narrative history of a proud tabernacling people, a people about to be homeless no more, a people who have spent their

ancestral lives on the move. We have followed this traveling band on the run during their long wilderness sojourn as a people happy to have found freedom in their liberated exile. We are blessed to be privy to explore their biblical adventure in the ongoing salvation story of the Hebrews who would become Israelites on a journey to a land that would become their home, theirs for the taking, seizing by conquest, a land of promise, the homeland of Canaan, a land that was said to be flowing with milk and honey. We read of God's divine invitation to Moses to come and visit, to sit a spell with the Holy One, inviting this freedom fighter to ascend the quaking and shaking mountain in anticipation of receiving the law, the giving of the ten commandments that would lead, guide, and direct God's covenant with this select people as they prepared for a new future, believing themselves to be special, the very chosen of God. Yes, we see Moses in the cloud, better said, we do not see Moses in the cloud, only imagining the conversation taking place behind the curtain.

The primary focus on our liturgical menu today, however, is the annual celebration that closes our first observance of the two seasons of Ordinary Time that from a time wise perspective dominate the Church Year calendar as a bookend feast, a festival unlike any other found in the Bible. **On this sacred day we bask in the glow of Jesus' divine transformation, strangely called Transfiguration, the writer of Matthew's Gospel stealing some thunder from the Hebrew Bible, frequently one-upping the story of Moses the great liberator in favor of the quintessential liberator of all time, the rabbi from Nazareth. Anything the venerable recipient of the law could do, Jesus could do better in Matthew's not-so-humble opinion, his very biased estimation! In this graphically bizarre and strangely curious Matthean story we read a depiction of two towering figures of old meeting the ultimate servant of God anew. What a gathering it must have been, Moses, representing the law, Elijah, representing the prophets, and Jesus, representing all things new, a prophetic wonder who would be claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah, the human one described as incarnate, heaped with flattery by given the ultimate title, called the very Christ of God.** Matthew's detailed depiction of events, graphically described in the technicolor of dazzling bright white, is a metaphorical goldmine, a narrative full to overflowing with amazing allegory and symbolism, symbolic imagery the order of the day in this epic tale. This morning we read a story that is truly, indeed, larger than life, a narrative that stretches

even our most wild imaginations, challenging every fiber of our being, stretching our wish to believe literally if only for a moment, to even remotely find a way to accept and embrace at face value these wildest of notions. Yes, these radical images of mystical proportions portray the most profound but preposterous possibility, revealing nothing and everything amid the limitation of human language. Jesus' Transfiguration, at every level, presents a hugely incredible, indescribable, incredulous ideas, imagining if but for a moment that any of it is not born of the most fantastic fictional fantasies filling the Gospel writer's imagination. And yet no matter the legitimacy of historical factuality, the meaning and message of Transfiguration continues to speak volumes, ours for the taking, moving us beyond timebound limitations, taking us soaring to new heights, the highest vistas, of belief and faith to rise above the bounds this finite, mortal, life can afford to offer us. **Transfiguration calls us to step out of our comfort zones, to color outside the lines of all that is familiar, forcing us to enter a world that is more than make-believe, transcending our best conjecture and speculative curiosity. So, with all that being said, let's journey with Peter and James and John and Jesus, the very enigmatic one, and scale new heights of glory bright, hiking with the boys up the mountain where we will encounter the likes of two great figures from Israelite lore, Moses and Elijah. It don't get any better or crazier than this! This summit is far beyond any close encounter of a third kind we could ever creatively imagine!**

Part of the mystery and intrigue undergirding this farfetched ethereal tale is the matter-of-fact verbiage that accompanies some very other worldly vernacular. The first oddity about this long daytrip is the fact that at this point in in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, the rabbi has obviously by now figured out the pecking order and now finds it necessary to play favorites, to pick and choose, to acknowledge and to nurture the apostles who truly showed exceptional apostolic talents and gifts. On this excursion only Peter, James, and John, the two brothers known as "the sons of thunder," would receive an invite. Yes, perhaps ironically, James and John were the same two disciples who once arrogantly asked Jesus if they would be allowed a place of prestige in the eternal realm, that they might possess the power of being seated right next to Jesus in the hereafter. It was not a good optic, not a good move on their part, but on this day they got everything, exactly what they wanted, yes, a front row seat,

ringside baby! Obviously, Jesus saw beyond that unfortunate moment, seeing through their narcissism and knew that they had the mettle and would cut the mustard of his stringent demands for leadership discipleship! And of course, there is Peter, Peter, a mixed bag of humanity all wrapped in one just as we all are! We are never told what the other nine did during this foursome's time away or what they thought of being excluded from this play day, left out, of the solemn procession and subsequent festivities. Had to sting just a little bit, don't you think? And on the way back down to the valley of reality, as a major sidebar, Jesus adds to the drama of it all by instructing them not to utter a word, to say nothing, that this phenomenal day's events would be their little secret. Obviously, this journey was not an exercise in community building! Wow, how could this lucky trio contain themselves? Surely the other nine suspected, knowing in their gut that something monumental, perhaps supernatural, had happened!

But our focus is on the goings-on that took place on this very high peak, up on the mountaintop! It was by all accounts a summit on the summit! Hopefully more than a high altitude hallucination, suddenly Moses and Elijah appear out of seemingly nowhere. It is an obviously shocking moment in time. For almost simultaneously, Jesus suddenly is changed in the twinkling of an eye, yes, the biblical term being transfigured, his face shining like the sun, his clothes as white as dazzling light! No bleach could touch this! No, this is not business as usual! Something is happening here, something is in the air, and the Jesus story would sadly and literally never be the same, all business, all downhill from here, until The Gospels twists and turns tragically ascended again climbing a hill called Golgotha, Jesus' execution by crucifixion a horrific end to a wonderfully great life. From this day forward, they would all be participating in a death march. Lent had not been invented yet, but a Lenten journey was now firmly in the offing, a valley of the shadow of death awaiting the radical rabbi and friends. And there in the blinding light was Jesus and Elijah and Moses making casual conversation as if three old friends were having a reunion! Well, we do not know the reaction of the thunder brothers, but as usual we know exactly the response, the reaction, from Peter, the blockhead, I mean Rock! Except for a few cases, it is always Peter who suffers from a severe case of foot-in-mouth disease, an ailment that begins and ends with an inability to shut up, to keep his piehole closed. Yes, I often resemble that remark!

Many of us do! Peter is unable to enjoy, is incapable of embracing the moment! He simply cannot leave well enough alone and allow the significance of what is transpiring before him seize the day and seize his soul. If it is a test he fails miserably, flunking this not-yet-final exam! Yes, holiness makes us uncomfortable, fidgety and squirmy! We so long for the presence of God, but when it is manifest, we are so mentally and spiritually unprepared and yes, so very human! And Transfiguration is all about spirituality! The Hebrew Bible tells us that to see God's glory, to see the face of the Divine, was instant death! Who could blame Peter? Someone had to cut the tension, burst this bubble larger than a Chinese spy balloon! I knew I would get that into a sermon! Yes, someone, anyone, and it was Peter as almost always, who had to speak! Shhhhhhhhh! There is always a market for stupid and today that shoe fit the Rock, yes, hand in glove!

Stating the obvious, Peter says with the greatest of understatement, "Lord, it is good that we are here!" Good to be here! Duh! Really! Seriously! And who among that intimate gathering would not have realized this to be the case! But, Peter is not done, nowhere finished. No, the soon-to-be-thrice-denier is just getting started, just getting warm! Hey Jesus, I've got a great idea! Forget about your mission and ministry, your preaching and teaching, your message to all the hurting people down below, the dispossessed, disenfranchised, the marginalized folks who desperately need you the most. Just turn away and forget those who precariously live on the fringes of society, those who are food and basic necessities insecure, beaten down by bigotry, and desperately need the voice and vote you demand for them. You and you alone have offered them solace, given them a reserved seat, an honored place, at God's divine table! You have done enough! You are no longer responsible for their wellbeing! Time to rest on your laurels, retire here to this mountaintop oasis! Great place to live out your remaining years! Let's just tarry here! Let's stay here a while or longer. Maybe, just maybe, no one would even miss us! This is too good! The world below be damned! Let it go to hell in a handbasket. This is it! We have found nirvana! Let's stay here forever! I've got it, "If you want"—great apologist disclaimer inserted here—"I will make three shrines (other sources say dwellings): one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Notice, Peter did not include James and John in his clandestine plan. Peter's proposal left everyone speechless, everyone except

God that is, who obviously had heard enough nonsense. After all, God was presumably the initiator of this high profile, VIP, gathering! Evidently it took a booming, reverberating, voice to get their attention. Out of the cloud a voice thunders, “This is my Son whom I dearly love (am well pleased), Listen to him!” Yes, it is the same phrase we hear at Jesus’ baptism. It is a message that Peter and James and John desperately needed to hear. It is a word we followers of Jesus need to hear time and time, over and over and over, again! Yes, listen to Jesus! We need to listen to Jesus! We need to hear his subtle and his loudest voice pleading for us to be his subtle and loudest voice. Yes, we are to be a worldwide megaphone for social justice! Peter, you are like Martha in that story with her sister Mary, you are busy about many things and, yet only one thing is needed, only one thing will do. You need to be quiet, observe a much-needed discipline of silence despite not being able to contain the amazing things transpiring before your very eyes. It is so human for us to attempt to concretize, to fulfill our need to institutionalize, things of spiritual substance. Some things, many things, are beyond buildings, shrines, words! The Church has so often failed to get that memo in all its striving! Even the most magnificent, the most opulent, of edifices, the greatest of church buildings, cathedrals, temples, mosques, you name it, cannot capture the essence of whatever constitutes pure holiness, the presence of an awe producing and wonder eliciting, inspiring and inspiriting, transcendent God. Peter learned this lesson the easy and the hard way! Everyone, all of us, must learn this lesson as well!

Every week we gather for worship and hope and pray that we will experience the mystical reality of transcendence, that we will sense the very presence of God, the awe and wonder of an ultimate existential mountaintop moment moving us beyond all time and space. Yes, even in the liturgy, from the Greek “leitourgia,” literally meaning “the work of the people” as we read and recite, pray and sing, we are being reminded of our need to be still, to shut it down, to hit the pause button, to center ourselves, and yes, to be in this moment. Yes, time to pause and ponder, time to wonder as we wander, to contemplate, to reflect, to discern! Whenever I imagine transcendence, I am reminded of the poem about flying written by Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee who was killed on December 11, 1941, four days after a “Day that will live in infamy!”

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue,
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew –
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untresspassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.*

Magee could have been describing our soaring spirits with the Spirit!

Peter! Just stop! Stop what you are doing and more essential, what you are thinking! This moment is about being, not doing! Not today! For tomorrow, tomorrow will come and will take care of itself! It is in these holy, sacramental, actions that we find stillness, yes, an irony of ironies. Who could blame Peter for his unbridled enthusiasm and his need to do something! We inheritors of the Protestant work ethic, are always programmed, prone, to do something. We need to be active, to be productive, work product proof of the pudding of our commitments in life and in faith. No, Transfiguration is a sobering reminder of our need to “be still and know,” that transformation comes as a gift from God and is never of our own making, even though intentionality is demanded by us in our daily walk. Yes, it is not either/or but is both/and. Yes, it is counterintuitive! How can we be busy and contemplative, actively working out our salvation and reflective, and all of it all at the same time? The answer is found in the mystery of God’s loving grace that allows us an amazing capacity to compartmentalize and multitask in our belief and faith and all at once as we go about our life and living. We just have to learn to know when to say when and when not to say anything and sometime when to say “No!” God is Being, capital “B”, and being,

lower case “b”, is the key to our covenant relationship, with God, with self, and with one another.

My prayer for our gathering in all the many ways we gather as beloved faith community, yes, especially when we gather for worship, is that at least one or some of us at least some of the time experience the transcendent mystery of holy presence, as random and rare as God-experiences may be in this life, never assuming or taking for granted that this rarified reality is as commonplace as our next meal. Everyday cannot provide a mountaintop experience. Not that it would become old or routine, not that it would not be a continual welcome relief, a respite from the cares of this world, but it truly is the pearl of great price, the value of a lost but found coin, the prodigal who was gone for good but has returned with a whole new attitude, a new perspective on life and the gifts that are ours when we stop and smell the roses wherever they appear on life’s road. My hunch is that Peter learned a valuable lesson that day, a lesson that would serve him well after Jesus’ death, would be his steady companion for the rest of his life. It is the same lesson we all must learn. Like Elijah of old, speaking of the prophet in today’s Transfiguration tableau, God is rarely found in the chaos of the storm or the violence of an earthquake, but indeed is discovered in the still, small voice, yes, in the sheer sound of silence. In our daily God-hunts, may we remember the vital possibility as probability of meeting God as if for the first time, yet, realizing that our God was right there the whole time, but we were so distracted or distressed that we missed this wonderfully frozen moment in time. Sometimes we need to be the un-builder to gain the very thing we desire the most. At least on occasion, be still and know! A world of divine possibilities is ready and waiting when we are willing! Thanks be to God! May God continue to transfigure, to transform, each and every one of us, a portrait of perfection growing and maturing us until we become the divine creations God intended for all of us human beings and doings to be!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and is continually transfiguring all creation, transforming you and me in the process! Amen and amen.