

## **Transfiguration Sunday February 19 2023**

### **Matthew 17:1-9**

I have talked before about how each Gospel is written to a specific community of early Christians. The author writes the story of the life and ministry of Jesus in such a way that it speaks to the questions, concerns, and challenges of that community. They do this in the same way we tell a story from our own lives in a particular way to make a point to our children or a friend. To let them know that there are other people who have experienced this, too. Or to help them see an event in a different way. Perhaps to give them hope that they are not alone in this experience. That things will get better.

The author of Matthew is writing to a community where some are losing confidence in the coming reign of heaven. They are drifting away because they don't see anything happening and no hope that it will. Thinking, maybe it's all just made up. Matthew shapes the narrative of Jesus to give them hope. To remain faithful, even in the face of a divided society and a divided church.

The transfiguration story in Matthew is told as a promise, a word of reassurance. A revelation that Jesus is indeed the one who will come again and make all things new. For Matthew the power of the resurrected Jesus continues to operate in the world, even after his ascension. This is the promise of Matthew 28, "I am with you always to the end of the age." But the final and full coming of the Reign of Heaven will not occur until Jesus returns again. At the transfiguration, God gives Peter, James, and John but also the Matthean church a vision of the future: Jesus

as he will be on the day God resurrects him and as he will be when he returns to complete the work of replacing the old world with the new.

Matthew tells the story in this way so that the church will believe that the Reign of Heaven that is promised is worth suffering through the times that they are living in. That it is worth enduring the challenges that come with listening to Jesus' great commission and baptizing in the name of the Triune God, teaching all that Jesus has shared with us, following Jesus on the way.

The lectionary places this text here, now, at the end of the Season of Epiphany for a reason. The seasons of Advent and Christmas claim that Jesus is God's very presence in the world bringing change from what was into what will be. In Matthew the promise is that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

The season of Epiphany, this season of light and discovery, emphasizes Jesus' teaching about the nature of the Reign of Heaven and how to live in its light. A place where those honored are not the rich and powerful, but the poor and desolate. Where the honored are not the warmakers, but the peacemakers. Where you love your enemy and pray even for those who persecute you.

The transfiguration demonstrates in a vivid way that Jesus is indeed the one who is bringing in the Reign of Heaven. And, that part of that Reign has already broken into the world and is present. In Jesus, God with us, and in those who follow him.

Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday, is a season of theological reflection, a deep look at ourselves as individuals and a community (Ya'll) in the light of God's Son and the description of the Reign of Heaven that he brings. A season to see where we have followed well, where we have fallen short, and to recommit

ourselves to striving, with the help of the Holy Spirit and ever so imperfectly, to show forth a bit of that reign of heaven in our lives every day.

The Transfiguration is a vision of the future to sustain us through the sometimes somber days of Lent that lie ahead. A vision of what a colleague calls the “bright and sparkly Jesus” to hold before us as second Peter says, as a “lamp shining in a dark place.”

And what do we see and hear in this Transfiguration? Along with Peter, James, and John?

Jesus in conversation with Elijah and Moses the physical embodiment of the Hebrew Scriptures- Law and Prophets. Matching Jesus’ own promise in the Sermon on the Mount that he has come to fulfill what is promised in those texts. We have the voice of God telling us to listen to Jesus. To attend to his words. Not just to go in one ear and out the other, but words that do something in us.

The word for transfiguration is the root of our word metamorphosis. A change in form. Peter, James, and John see Jesus differently now. And in this experience, they themselves are transformed. Changed.

Have you noticed this throughout the gospels. Jesus never leaves people as they are. They are always changed. Peter, James, and John were once fishermen. Now, they are something else. Followers of Jesus, from the backwaters of a small Roman province who will lead the formation of the largest religion in the world today. One that thrives almost 2,000 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

People are changed by Jesus. The leper, sent away clean. The paralytic, walking again. Even Pilate, who ultimately is responsible for his death, is changed by his encounter with Jesus.

How are we, as individuals but also as a community (ya'll) changed, transformed by our encounter with Jesus. If we are not changed, have we really seen him? Listened to him? Looked at him in the way Matthew describes, not just with the eyes, but with the mind.

As one commentator wrote, "Our encounter with Jesus should leave the church a transfigured community—present in the old age but shining with the light of the new."

Lent is that time for us to consider- in the light of the Reign of Heaven, how well we have lived as what we are, citizens of that reign.

One of the things I noticed as I have been reading through the Hebrew Bible- the Old Testament- especially in the book of Joshua, is a constant refrain. If you obey God, live in the way God has laid out for us, then things will go well. If you disobey- follow your own way of thinking, even if you think you do so for the glory of God- then things will go badly. Often the authors phrase it that God will send trouble or destruction on Israel. But I wonder if it is not so much that God causes the destruction, but rather that God knows the consequences of living in any way other than what God calls us to and warns us. If I tell you not to put your hand on that hot stove does it mean I caused it to burn your hand when you do? Or did I just know that it was hot and told you the truth?

The life we are called to live as citizens of the Reign of Heaven, is a life fuller and more abundant than life lived on our own. By our ideas of what is right and good.

Don't believe me? The CDC released data from a Youth Risk Behavior Survey this week. It shows that nearly 1 in 3 High School girls seriously considered suicide in 2021. Teen girls reported the highest ever levels of sexual violence, sadness, and hopelessness. The recent release by Drake University of statistics from a 2018 Iowa Youth Survey, show that bullying related to sexual orientation or gender identity, or hurtful sexual jokes and comments, were consistently correlated with feelings of sadness and hopelessness as well as suicide attempts. Cyberbullying, social bullying, and bullying based on race also had significant correlations with mental distress and suicide attempts.

Research shows that there is a strong correlation between the rise in rates of those considering suicide, feeling sadness and hopelessness and 2012, when smartphones first became popular. A result of this "connected" world we have created through technology. Life fuller and more abundant? I don't think so.

The CDC study finds that helping students feel cared for, supported, and that they belong goes a long way in mitigating the factors that lead to hopelessness and thoughts of suicide. There is a large body of research that shows that young people who have a sense of connectedness with family and their community now will, 20 years later, have better mental health. That helping them learn how to have healthy in-person relationships will help give them resilience in the face of challenges.

Does this sound like what Christ is calling us to in the Reign of Heaven? A way of living that is based on love, care, support. A knowledge of belonging, welcome,

regardless of who you are. Equipping people for the difficult but oh so rewarding task of sustaining healthy relationships.

This transformation that our encounter with Jesus brings is not easy or simple. Just ask Peter, James, and John about their own transformation. One that, ultimately, led to their deaths. But each knew- deep in their souls- that the Reign Jesus brought was worth it. Was better than anything this world offered.

The transformation will not be perfect or seamless. It will mean a lot of soul searching and difficult conversations- because it is a change that is not just an individual thing, but a ya'll thing. A change in how we live, what we honor, who we love as a community.

But it is doable. When we love each other as God in Jesus has loved us. Without limits. When we speak truth in love to one another. When we listen intently, because we are hearing the truth of one who bears the image of God. When we ponder deeply, like Mary and Joseph faced by a seeming impossibility of bearing and raising the Son of God. When we do this together, with God, anything is possible.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, comforted in the knowledge that God overshadows us, led by the bright light of Jesus, let us affirm now that our hope lies not in ourselves, but in God alone. The same one who came to us in Jesus. Let us rejoice together; in these Alleluias of praise that we will put to rest for a time, in our presence with one another, and bask in the bright glow of Jesus transfigured and proclaim the truth- how good it is that we are here.