

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 26, 2017
Transfiguration Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 99
Philippians 3:7-14
Matthew 17:1-9

We find ourselves today in the church year on a day filled with much meaning, because it connects us to what has gone *before* and it links us to what is about *to come*. It is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday in the season after Epiphany. The first Sunday in this season took us to the baptism of Jesus, where the voice from heaven proclaimed, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Now, on this last Sunday in the season, the voice from the mountaintop says again, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

But this day also pushes us forward into Lent. Our Gospel lesson today begins with the words "six days later." This begs the question as to what just happened. And the answer is that six days prior to this Jesus was speaking to his disciples about his passion, about his impending journey toward Jerusalem and the Cross. And we know that *subsequent* to this Gospel text that Jesus comes down from the mountain and continues that very journey.

But for today, Jesus is high upon that mountain. He has taken Peter, James and John with him. The text tells us that as he is with them, his face begins to

shine like the sun, and his clothing becomes dazzling white. Then Moses and Elijah show up, and the party starts to take off.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning once said: *Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit around and pick blackberries.*

Peter, James and John aren't interested in picking berries, but they do *see* what is happening, and the experience is truly awe-inspiring. Peter blurts out, "Lord, this is wonderful! If you want me to, I'll make three shrines, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!"

Many people are critical of Peter at this point for responding like most of *us* do when we encounter something miraculous and beyond our understanding -- we want to *do something*.

But perhaps we should not be too harsh with Peter here. Some scholars have noted that his response is consistent with what is, quite literally, an epiphany, a manifestation of divine presence. Peter wishes to make a booth, a tent, a tabernacle -- perhaps recalling the Jewish festival of Tabernacles -- by which to offer lodging for these historic and significant religious figures.

Others see in Peter's response the simple desire to capture the moment, much like we do now when we reach for a cell phone to snap a photo.

How we interpret Peter's response or read his motives is not the issue, however. The issue is what happens before Peter can even finish getting the words out of his mouth. While Peter is speaking, the cloud envelops them, and the voice says, "*This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him; listen to him.*"

Whatever Peter and the others may have thought was appropriate, it is clear now, as they lie on their faces scared out of their minds, that only one thing is necessary: *to listen to Jesus.*

We can read this text and so easily get caught up in *Jesus'* transfiguration -- the power, the glory, the wonder of it all. And well we should.

But I don't think this text is about *Jesus'* transfiguration alone. I think this story is also about the transformation of Peter, James, and John -- or at least the beginning of such. This experience is a pivotal moment in their calling, as it were. A moment of revelation and power so profound that everything is burned away in the clear light of God, and all that remains is one simple task: *to listen to Jesus.*

With Peter, the scene is both strange and poignant. He is stumbling all over himself trying to find something to do, and then in an instant he is on the ground, probably curled up like a baby. And then it's over. The light, the voice, the heroes of the past, are all gone. Only Jesus remains, who tells him to get up.

We typically think that Peter's "epiphany" moment came six days before this when Jesus asked a question about his identity, and Peter replied, "You are the

Christ, the Son of the Living God!" But I wonder if Peter's "epiphany" moment is deepened right here when he is interrupted, when the heavenly voice silences all of his plans and his plots and announces that the most important vocation Peter now has is simply to *listen to Jesus*. In this moment, everything becomes clear.

But of course it doesn't last, does it? Peter is pulled up off the ground, perhaps wondering what has just happened. As they descend from the mountain, Jesus begins talking again of his impending death and destiny. And what happens? Peter struggles *to listen*. He struggles to *hear* this. He struggles to follow, and to be faithful.

Actually, he will more than struggle -- he will fail. And Jesus will reach out, raise him up again, and send him forth. I wonder whether each time Peter fell down and got up again, he would look back on this day and recall those words, "Just listen to him!"

I'm increasingly grateful for Peter because I see so much of myself in him. The pattern of his experience, I think, shapes the life of every Christian. For example:

We, too, try our best, sometimes succeeding and sometimes coming up short.

We, too, have moments of insight and moments of denial.

We, too, fall down in fear and are raised up again to go forth in confidence.

We, too, are called to listen to Jesus. We are called to discern God's way in the world. We are called to partner with God in God's work, and in doing so to be transformed. This is not just Peter's story, or the story of James and John. This is *our* story. This is *our* destiny. Like Peter, James, and John, *we are called to listen and to be raised up.*

Finally, notice what happens near the end of this story. After all of the fireworks, Jesus touches the men and says, "Get up." But as they do, they look, and it is only Jesus remaining with them.

When everything is over -- when Moses and Elijah are gone, the voice is quiet, Jesus' face and clothing have returned to normal, and the disciples are left in holy awe -- *all that is left is Jesus.* Whatever all these signs and symbols may have meant, the disciples are once again left with their Lord, their teacher, their friend. Jesus, the one whose clothes and face shone like the sun, the one greater than Moses and Elijah, the one whom the very heavens proclaim as God's own beloved Son, *will not leave them.*

And neither has he left us. How do I know this?

Just before the events in our Old Testament lesson this morning, where Moses and Joshua go up Mount Sinai and encounter God's presence there, an interesting thing happens. If you read what happens just prior to this in Exodus 24,

you'll see that what happens there is that the leaders and the people encounter God, but the experience is beyond description, so what we get are images of the ground on which God is revealed.

God's glory is beyond the capacity of human beings to describe, much less comprehend. It's what happens next that is intriguing. Following this experience on the mountain the leaders and people and God engage in a covenant meal ceremony. God's glory is beyond human knowing, but something of it *is* made known in this communal meal where the covenant is ratified.

Does this remind you of anything?

Today, you are invited to the table of the Lord. You are invited to share a covenant meal by the One who says, "This blood is the *New Covenant* in my blood." The indescribable and transfiguring grace of God is present here through the One who never leaves us or forsakes us.

So come with faith. Open your heart to his grace. Let the light of his presence burn everything else away, until all that is left is the call that comes to each of us: *to listen to him*, to follow him where he leads, and to be raised up.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.