

Transfiguration: Emmanuel

Exodus 24:12-18 Psalm 2 2 Peter 1:16-21 Matthew 17:1-9

We talked last week about how Easter is about as late as it can possibly get this year, which means that Lent is late as well. But even though we've been able to put it off for weeks longer than normal, Lent's coming this week. Which means we're going to have to start going down that road that leads to the cross. And none of us really wants to do that, do we? We'd much rather concentrate on the deep blessings that are the beatitudes, or on healings, or parables. But Lent is coming. And so is the road to Jerusalem.

But first we have today, Transfiguration Sunday. One last stop before turning our minds toward Jerusalem and the cross.

It was one last stop for the disciples as well.

We notice that our gospel scripture this morning starts with "Six days later ..." Six days later than what? Well, six days earlier was when Jesus asked the disciples who people said that he was, and then who they thought he was, and Peter answered, "You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God." After praising Peter and telling the disciples to keep their mouths shut about his being the Messiah, Jesus went on (using the words of *The Message* translation) to make ...

... it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive. Peter took him in hand, protesting, "Impossible, Master! That can never be!"

But Jesus didn't swerve. "Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works."

Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your

true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?

So here we are, six days later, and the disciples have not forgotten that they're about to turn to Jerusalem, where Jesus will suffer and be killed. Where they will also be expected to sacrifice themselves. And I'm betting they weren't very excited about it.

Jesus takes three of them—Peter, James and John—to the top of a high mountain, where they experience something amazing.

(Now, I'm going to caution us right now to put aside the parts of our brains that are trying to figure out whether Jesus' face was *actually* changed—and how would that have happened?—and really, Moses and Elijah showed up as well? In our post-Enlightenment era we're terribly oriented toward "facts," believing that if something isn't factual, it isn't true. The Bible was written centuries before the Enlightenment, however, when the story held the truth, and no one worried about the factuality of it. I'm asking you to just accept that the story here says that Jesus was transfigured, and a couple of Old Testament characters showed up with him. And our job is to figure out what the story means—what we are meant to understand from the story—not what's factual about it.)

Okay. Back to the story. Jesus took three of them—Peter, James and John—to the top of a high mountain, where they experienced something amazing. Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."

His face shone like the sun. That's not just a flowery description of how bright Jesus' face was. Several chapters earlier in Matthew, Jesus explains what things will be "at the end of the age," (13:40), and he says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (13:43). At the end of the age—when we're beyond earthly things and into the kingdom of God, "the righteous will shine like the sun." Jesus' shining face reveals to the disciples a glimpse of what is to come for him, that he belongs in the kingdom of God ... that he is the one whom Peter called him: *the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

In case Jesus' disciples had some doubts about who it was they were following, who it was they were about to accompany to Jerusalem and his death, here he is: the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

And there goes Peter, bustling into action. “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter wants to mark the spot, but I also get the impression that he’s a little uncomfortable with all this transcendence, and his response to being uncomfortable is to plunge into action. We’ve all known people like that. Peter’s a little like the father of a newborn infant who plunges into the video recording and, nowadays, the tweeting about the birth ... and maybe he’s measuring the baby’s feet and trying to read the doctor’s notes, and we want to say to him, “Hey, stop! You’ve got a new baby here! You don’t need to do anything! Sit down and enjoy this miracle.”

But in the middle of Peter’s bustling—actually interrupting his talking—a voice from a bright cloud says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” More confirmation—this Jesus isn’t just any old prophet, any old guru, any old teacher. This Jesus is God’s Son, God’s Beloved.

The disciples have a completely understandable reaction to hearing this voice, this voice that is clearly God, the Living God. They fall to the ground, overcome by fear.

The voice from the cloud continues: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” And “Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’”

When God speaks from the bright cloud, the disciples fall to the ground in terror. And then Jesus touches them and says, “Get up, and do not be afraid.”

In this scene on the mountaintop, the disciples experience Jesus as beyond human, belonging to the Kingdom of God, the Christ ... and they also experience him as completely human. He touches them. On the top of their heads, perhaps, as they lie prostrate before God’s voice, or maybe on their shoulders. A gentle touch, a reassuring touch. He is Emmanuel—God-with-us.

God is glorious and magnificent and powerful and majestic—and God is also willing to shed all of that so that we might recognize God’s love and gentleness, so that we might be able to listen and hear, rather than fall to the ground in terror.

Listen to him. Be not afraid.

The disciples are about to accompany Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, the road to terror and failure and death. But before they start, they are given a gift. They have seen Jesus’ divinity, and in it they have

been given “eyes to see God’s light in the chaos to come.”¹ As they move into the death and loss and fear—and resurrection—that are to come, they will have this experience to draw on, this gift of Jesus as brightly shining God ... and as softly touching man.

Episcopal priest Maryetta Anschutz writes:

The challenge to the disciples is to live in a world without Jesus’ bodily presence. The transfiguration anticipates this challenge, inviting us to live in ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ [as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians] (2 Cor. 4:6). As that light shines in our hearts, the incarnate God is made real in the every day.²

We too have the challenge of living without Jesus’ bodily presence. But the light of his transfigured face shines in our hearts when we listen to him—when we read his words and pray for his guidance, when we study to find out what he is really saying to us and not what the world tells us he is saying. The light of his face shines on us also when he touches us. How does he touch us? Through other Christians, through the body of Christ. When we reach out to touch someone, in comfort, in praise, in thanksgiving, in love, we are Christ reaching out. And saying, “Be not afraid.”

The weeks to come—the life to come—most surely hold despair and death. But Jesus touches us and says, “Be not afraid.”

Hallelujah. Amen.

¹ Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz, “Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 17:1-9” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, 2010, p. 454.

² Ibid.