

“Get Up and Do Not Be Afraid”

Psalm 2; Matthew 17:1-9

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Transfiguration Sunday, in terms of liturgical seasons, stands on the threshold between the season of Epiphany and the season of Lent. In other words, since Christmas we’ve been in a season focusing on *revealing* Christ’s true nature- Christ as divine, as son of God, as messiah. But we’re about to enter the season of Lent, a season of 40 days (minus Sundays) leading up to the celebration of Easter. A season where we remember the story of who Jesus was as an earthly human-being. A man on the margins, who fasted in the desert, who built friendships and community, who stirred up trouble for authorities, and who was killed by the state. And on the hinge point between these two seasons we have Transfiguration Sunday. I’ve often puzzled over this story and its meaning and the thing that bugs me the most is that it doesn’t seem to me that Christ is being transformed or transfigured- whatever that means- It’s more of a revelation! Christ isn’t changed- he can just be seen truly. And yet I wonder if this story, and its placement at this moment in the Christian year, is a witness to the paradox of the two things we hold to be true about Jesus- that he is divine messiah, and marginalized victim of state violence all at once and together. This Sunday and this story transfigures our perspective to be able to hold these two things as true together. Hear now what the Spirit is saying to us in the church in Matthew 17: 1-9.

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

So, I want us to start by putting ourselves in the disciples' shoes. Peter, James and John are devoted disciples called by Jesus, but it's likely that when they responded to that call to follow, they didn't really know what they were getting into. And by the time of the transfiguration things have started to get real. John the Baptist has been killed, just before Matthew tells this story of their mystical vision Jesus has predicted his own death and resurrection. He's said to them "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

White American Christianity, even in our mainline traditions, has tended to follow a sort of tame Christ. A kindly man who calmly told everyone to love each other and be harmonious and then was inexplicably killed for no reason by "the bad guys". But that's a dangerous distortion of our faith. Jesus certainly did teach a gospel of love, but not a passive love. This is a love that demands that all of God's creation be treated with dignity and care and so demands radical opposition to the forces that would see it exploited, harmed and demeaned.

We don't get much insight in Scripture to the internal thoughts and feelings of the disciples, but I wonder how their understanding of who Jesus is and "what they had gotten themselves into" changed over their years of discipleship. I don't think the disciples ever set out to follow a tame Jesus, but I also think their understanding of what it meant to be Christ's disciple and to radically live into his teachings was growing and being shaped through their learning.

We are living in a moment where the tame version of Jesus no longer holds up. To be blunt about it there never really was a time when this version of Jesus held up, but now even those of us blinded and deafened by our privilege see the inadequacy an understanding of Christ that never gets around to telling us to take up our cross. A few weeks ago, at a memorial service for Renee Good, Bishop Rob Hirschfeld of the Episcopal Church spoke about the church entering a new age of martyrdom. He said about his clergy:

"I've asked them to get their affairs in order to make sure they have their wills written," he said, "because it may be that now is no longer the time for statements, but for us with our bodies to stand between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable."

The statement sent chills through me, and it resulted in some backlash as well from some who said the view was too extreme. But I have to say it doesn't sound too much different from what Jesus says about taking up your cross. Bishop Hirschfield clarified that he didn't want anyone trying to go get hurt, and he was absolutely not advocating violence, but he was encouraging everyone to follow Christ without fear of death in this moment and recognizing that already we have seen people living into those values lose their lives.

I think we come to this Transfiguration Sunday as Peter, James, and John do. With the knowledge buzzing in our brains that this faith stuff has gotten really real, and in our time and place we are being called to respond in love in a radical way- in ways that we may not have realized we were getting into. Our faith demands that we not be passive, that we respond to the injustices and cruelties which are more and more each day before our eyes with urgency and with both words and actions.

And the scariness of that, the reality that we are being called beyond our comfort zones, should be acknowledged. And I think it's significant that it's in a moment like this for James and Peter and John that they witness Christ's Transfiguration.

So as we abide in Transfiguration Sunday, I want you to consider how you see Christ Transfigured before you. How is your faith being shaped and changed by the demands of this present moment? What is the meaning of this transfiguration for you?

As we stand and look into the season of Lent, we know the story that waits for us there. We know that the cross is coming. That the worst is coming. We also know that the resurrection is coming- that the Jesus who hangs on the cross is the same Jesus shining with blinding light with Moses and Elijah. But this year it wasn't the mystical vision that took hold of my imagination and heart; it was the moments after. The disciples are overcome with fear at Christ Transfigured- and I get it. But as they fall to the ground, as the fear makes it impossible for them to stand any longer there's this intimate moment. Jesus reaches out and touches them- he's there- right by their side, he says "Get up, and do not be afraid" and that's just what they do.

We live in scary times. I'm not going to pretend it's otherwise, but Jesus right here, in our midst- not tame but true, and real. There will be and have been moments where we are overcome, where everything just becomes too much. And Jesus is right there then as well. Saying "Get up!" You can do this. "Don't be afraid" Resurrection is coming. Let us pray.