

February 15, 2015

“What Are We Seeing”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 9: 2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

On this last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, before we embark on the annual 40-day Lenten journey, churches all over the world are hearing the story we just heard—the story of The Transfiguration of Jesus. It is truly the climax of this Christmas/Epiphany season, the season that began with the light of a star guiding the Wise Men to the place of Jesus’ birth. Today that light now explodes into full glory in the face of the One who will rise from the dead in the beautiful light of Easter morn.

Taking Peter, James and his brother, John, Jesus ascends the mountain to pray. There, the three disciples enter into the presence of God and they see what they can barely yet believe. They see right into the very heart of God. Their beloved friend and teacher, the very human Jesus, undergoes a metamorphosis, a change in form. No ordinary teacher, this. No ordinary friend, this. So who IS he, they wonder?

Jesus is transfigured before them. The appearance of his face changes, taking on the radiance usually reserved for heavenly beings. His clothes become dazzling white. The presence of God is revealed, shining through the face of their teacher and they see that this very Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Son of God, Christ the Lord.

On that mountain top, they sense that Moses and Elijah are there, too, connecting him to the great law-giver and the prophet of their Jewish faith. They begin to see that he is the one who brings it all together—the law, the prophets, the promised Messiah. How can they take this in?

Now as this is happening, like many of us might do, Peter is so overwhelmed by the whole thing that he doesn’t know what to say and he blurts the only thing he can call from what he has known, what has been familiar to him...that line about the three dwellings or tents. It sounds sort of goofy, but the text says that he really didn’t know what to say in that moment, filled as he was, with the awe and fear of the Lord. Not being able to explain what is happening, he draws on what he has known—the Jewish tradition of the Feast of the Tabernacles in which small booths were built to remind the people that though they had no permanent home, God’s presence was always with them.

In that moment of confusion and fear, the presence of God envelops the three disciples, softening the brightness of the light, and they hear those reassuring words: “This is my Son, by Beloved. Listen to him.” And as they descend they do listen and they try to comprehend but it’s hard because he’s telling them something so awesome, so new, so wonderful that they just can’t yet take it in: that he, the Son of Man, will rise from the dead.

Jesus Christ is the light of the World, from humble birth to luminous Transfiguration to glorious resurrection.

Have you known anything like such a moment? Moments when, in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God?” Have you seen it—in a sunset? At a hospital bed? At a birth? After a rain? Have you seen it? In a friend’s forgiveness? In a partner’s love? In a dolphin’s leap? In light through the stained glass window?

There are experiences in life that leave us speechless, times when words are utterly inadequate. Those experiences can come at high points of wonder, love, and praise, as for those early disciples. But they can come, too, at life’s low points, when we are left not knowing what to say. Times of darkness and pain. Times of loss and grief. There come times in life when, like Peter, we do not know what to say, or how to put words to the sorrow or the fear that we feel. This Day of Transfiguration is for those times, too, not just the mountain top experiences. For, yes, the Son of Man will rise from the dead, but first, he will walk through the valley of the shadow of death and he will know, just as we know, the pain of suffering and death. The Light of the World that he is is the light that shines in the darkness. It is the light that the darkness can never overcome.

I think God and Jesus gave those first disciples the experience of the Transfiguration because they knew that the times of darkness would come and they would need internal spiritual resources to carry them through what would come—his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. They would need to know about the light.

In the transfigured face of Christ, that light shines in our lives as well. Through grief and fear, through doubt and cynicism, through violence and war, through suffering and death, our way is illumined by the holy light of God's presence and love. We see it first on the mountaintop, where God's presence draws near. And we carry it down to the flatlands and the valleys of our lives, even to the valley of the shadow of death.

The Christian faith takes us always into the real world, but we see it with new eyes. That's what this whole season of Epiphany has been about, really, seeing things in new ways, seeing through what appears to be, to what is meant to be.

In a few minutes, our choir is going to sing a new piece written for Transfiguration Sunday by Craig Naylor. Craig is the son of pillars of this congregation, Roy and Maxine Naylor, brother of Kathy. A teacher and prolific composer, his compositions have been played worldwide by ensembles ranging from elementary school bands to choirs to the orchestral soundtrack for an IMAX film.

The text of the anthem is printed in your Order of Worship and I commend it to you. Stick it in your pocket or your purse and pray it as a prayer in these few days leading into the season of Lent.

"Come and see the light of the radiant Jesus. Come and hear the voice,

"I love my son. Listen to Him."

Listen with your heart. Come and see the light. Come and see the sacred sight shimmering, glimmering and see the sacred sight. Listen to Him.

Listen, and our heart leaps up to the mountain top where past and present meet as one. The light of our heart rises up to You and our spirit rises up like a bird on the wing.

Look from the mountain and all you see is light from the love of Jesus.

Let us be transformed.

Come and see the light of shimmering love. "My son, listen to Him." Listen."

Listening, what do we hear? Looking, what do we see? To hear that voice, to see this light, guides us to walk in that same light. It is to know that there is a love that carries us and guides us and at all times and in every circumstance shows us the way to the heart of God. It is to interpret the meaning of all life through the template of love.

In this light, we will in this next week begin our walk through the season of Lent, down from the mountaintop, through the valley, with this same Christ Jesus, daring to look deep within and to journey with him through risk and loss, even death, all the way to resurrection.

"For neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:28-29)

May our eyes and hearts be opened this day and our hearts grow large and strong. And may all our living, and our dying, be transfigured by the light of God's amazing love.

Amen.

Notes:

Donald Booz. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

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