

February 7, 2016



“on transfiguration, prayer and mercy in the midst of change”

Homily by Rev. Robert English

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

A few weeks ago the great actor Alan Rickman died. He will always be remembered to many, including myself, as the character Severus Snape from the Harry Potter films. Severus Snape is, in my opinion, the most wonderful and interesting character from the Harry Potter series.

Spoiler alert, although the Harry Potter has been around for years, throughout the entire series there is an ongoing question about whether Severus Snape is a villain or hero, whether he is good or bad, and in the end we discover, not only is he a hero, but he is the most heroic character in the entire story.

When they started filming the movies, the author JK Rowling, had not yet finished the book series, although she knew the larger story arch. Following Alan Rickman’s death, JK Rowling shared that during the filming of the fourth movie she told Alan Rickman the entire story of Severus Snape, revealing the secret plot twists that would redeem his character and unveil to the world that Snape acted from a place of sacrificial love.

Alan Rickman held the entirety of this story within himself throughout the filming of the next four movies. He even knew more than his directors who coach him in various ways which didn’t make sense in light of where it all would end up. He carried the fullness of Severus Snape’s story in his mind and it changed the way he brought Severus Snape to life, giving the audience glimpses of the truth of his character, all along the way no matter how subtle.

There are connecting points here for us as we understand the story of Jesus in the gospels and specifically the text we heard read this morning; the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. We can see the parallel between Jesus who carries within himself the fullness of his story, the truth that underlies and undergirds everything that he says and does; this truth revealed in a sacred and holy moment when he is transfigured on a mountain top:

That Jesus is the fullness of God’s grace and redemption incarnate, who by his death and resurrection saves the world.

This story, which Jesus carries, is so incomprehensible and mysterious that it must be revealed incrementally along the way, especially to those who knew Jesus the best, his greatest friends and closest followers.

This story is so totally unbelievable that it had to come in glimpses and moments along the way.

It had to be a slow and ongoing process, for the disciples, of gradually opening their hearts and transforming their minds toward this profound and paradoxical truth, Jesus is human, Jesus is Divine, and following in his way means living into the Kingdom of God.

Revealed all at once to the disciples, without the trust and relationship they develop with Jesus over time, it would have been too much for them to handle. Their minds would have literally been blown. It would have been too unbelievable and therefore so easily dismissed as a flaw in human perception that it most likely would have been forgotten or ignored.

Maybe you’ve been there before, you’ve had this moment where you’ve seen or experienced something so overwhelming and extraordinary that you’ve had to stop in your tracks and say, wait did that just happen? Was that for real?

And if that experience remains as an outlier in your realm of reality, then more often than not, you dismiss it as that one amazing thing that may or may not have ever happened. And it never has a chance to take hold in your heart, to plant itself deeply within you and changed your life.

Imagine the transfiguration was the only moment of revelation the disciples ever experience, imagine it was the only glimpse of the true Jesus? Do you think it would have changed their life? Do you think that they would have devoted themselves fully to following his way? Do you think they would have been so profoundly and deeply transformed? I can imagine that they would have done what I would do- dismiss it all as that onetime weird mountaintop thing that happened and gone along with the rest of their lives.

The good news of the gospel is this; God reveals hard truths, mind blowing, life altering truths, in the context of an ongoing, sustained and sustaining relationship with God.

In other words, God doesn't leave us hanging. God doesn't stop revealing to us the nature of life with the divine. It happens continuously over our lives as we grow and are transfigured and transformed into the fullness of who God longs for us to be. The presence of God in our lives continues to take shape and unfold as we actively open ourselves to God's grace and mercy and love.

And God never stops speaking into our hearts and our lives.

But sometimes, sometimes we stop listening. Sometimes we become stifled in our growth and understanding of God. Sometimes we stop following in the way of Jesus, we lose sight of the rhythms of life which bring our hearts into alignment with the heart of God.

Sometimes we get overwhelmed with the hard truth of the gospel, like love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, give your second coat away to the person whose cold-

because secretly we would prefer to go back to a softer understanding of Christianity which doesn't ask us to change ourselves, which never asks us to be transformed, which doesn't believe in things like the transfigured Christ.

Sometimes we forget to pray. We stop asking for God's help in our lives. We stop looking for grace in our world.

Sometimes we get overwhelmed by the disconnected string of bad news which is constantly streaming into our minds that we give in and start to think that there isn't a point to all of this, and we start to believe, that the universe is cold, and dark, and meaningless.

If you are there, if you are here, in this place this morning, know that you are not alone.

There is good news even in this place because God never stops speaking into our hearts and our lives. God never stops showering us with streams of mercy and grace, God never stops longing and calling for us to know the way of humble life-giving love.

And we can trust one thing for certain, that things will always change. This is the one constant in our lives isn't it, change, which means growth, transformation and transfiguration; it is never easy, even when it's necessary and ultimately for the good.

A crucial part navigating any change is being intentional about prayer. Because through prayer we open our-selves up more and more to be transfigured and transformed.

There is this saying: 'if you don't want anything to change, don't pray.'

As we cultivate a life of prayer we learn to listen and respond to God, we find the gift of God's grace and mercy in the midst of the most difficult times of change. We learn to trust and believe that God is with us and that love will always win. A few years ago this community of prayer heard the call to serve and build a relationship with the people of Haiti. In January of 2011, just one year after the earthquake, we sent our first team to help rebuild a church in Mellier. Through the prayers of this congregation and a willingness to say yes to God, our community has been transformed. Since 2011 we have sent a team annually on our behalf to live and work with the people of Haiti. It has transfigured the life of our congregation and we have participated, in some small way, in God's transformative work in the country of Haiti through the United Methodist Church.

We have commissioned and sent all types of people from our congregation, people I would have never guessed in a million years have come up to me and said 'Yes, I feel called to this, I want to go.'

The unlikely, the unexpected beloved and faithful people, inspired by God and listening for God's call in their lives.

This morning we pray for our 2016 Haiti work team. 9 people, who heard God's voice in some way and said yes, I will go, send me. We will go on behalf of this community of prayer, to village of Sobier, a small, rural and impoverished community.

We do so surrounded by your prayers and in the name of the transfigured Christ who opens all our hearts to new worlds of love, who gives us a deep longing for change in our world and fills us all with hope beyond imagining.

Thanks be to God. Amen.