February 23, 2020 • The Transfiguration • Baptism

“Undergoing Transformation”
Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 17:1-9
And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high
mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was
white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered
Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and
one for Moses, and one for Elias. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of
the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.
And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said,
Arise, and be not afraid. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only. And as they came down
from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus has to be one of the stranger stories in the Bible. Coming at the end of
the season of Epiphany, it is the last big hurrah before the quieter, introspective season of Lent begins. It comes a critical
point in Jesus’ life, a point of major transition as he shifts from his active ministry to turn his face toward Jerusalem, the
place of his death and resurrection.

Before all that really kicks in, Jesus desperately wants his disciples to understand what’s at stake and what it means.
That’s what brings us to the drama of this day. He summons the select insider group of Peter and brothers James and
John, those fishermen he had called from fishing for fish to fish for the souls of men and women. In this incredible
experience that we call “The Transfiguration”, he calls them apart to experience something more, something even
more profound than all he had been saying and doing.

There on the mountaintop he gives them an opportunity to see more than his words, his ministry, his teaching, his
healing, his preaching, his popularity, his friendships, his prayer. Jesus wants them to see through and beyond all that
to something that could be apprehended most accurately not by ear or eye, but by heart and soul. Jesus wants them
to know who he really is—not just a teacher, a prophet, a healer—but the Messiah, the Son of God.

Up on the mountaintop the three disciples enter into the presence of God and they see what they can barely yet
believe. Their beloved friend and teacher, the very human Jesus, undergoes a metamorphosis, a change in form. He
is transfigured before them. The appearance of his face changes, taking on the radiance usually reserved for
heavenly beings. His clothes become dazzling white. They sense the presence of Moses and Elijah, the great law-
giver and prophet of their Jewish faith. They hear God speaking to them, saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with
him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

The story of the Transfiguration of Christ points to the true reality of Christ, the Light of the World. It offers access
through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. Its aim is to help us see beyond Jesus of Nazareth, the
Galilean, to see him radically transformed, that we might see him as the Son of God.

The Transfiguration is an experience of the very presence of God. It is a glimpse of the Holy. In its light, we see
God, and we see ourselves, with energizing clarity. As we see clearly who he is, we come face to face with the
identity we take on in our baptism. We look deeply into our vocation as disciples of this Christ. For a moment up
there on the top of Mount Tabor with Jesus and Moses and Elijah and Peter and James and John, we, too, are given
the power to become disciples of Christ and to share in the promise of the Kingdom of God.

We may get close to such moments of insight in our lives. We sometimes experience these moments of revelation for
ourselves—on a mountaintop, at sunrise, on the beach, looking into the face of a new baby, in the water of baptismal
renewal—we sometimes have those moments, too, moments of transfiguration, when everything seems to shine in a
new light and we see beyond the immediate to the eternal. From time to time, God permits us to see through to the
heart of the matter, just as what happened for Peter and James and John that day. Such moments are moments of
true blessing, gifts from God, the God who wants us to see and to understand.

Have you known such moments? 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?

As one preacher has said: "God’s presence transfigures this life. Ordinary revelations are here there and everywhere.” And WE ourselves are being transformed, even now, from one degree of glory to another.

This is a day to give ourselves over to something so beautiful, so powerful, so full of life and light that we can hardly catch our breath, nor can we speak, and it’s OK because no words are needed. We are standing now on holy ground. We are called to simply be, and to know that we are loved, and to know that in and through all things, God is with us.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ calls us to be his disciples, to share in this new life with him. Christ gives to us power to be healers. Power to share God’s good news. Power to share God’s love with those who need it most. Power to say: “Here I am, Lord, send me.”

In Christ, we are transformed. Through our baptism, we are “water-washed and Spirit-born.” Water-washed and Spirit-born. Those words are from the hymn in our hymnal, which we will sing in a few moments and that we often sing on days when we are baptizing a new member of Christ’s family.

“Wash, O God, our sons and daughters, where your cleansing waters flow. Number them among your people; bless as Christ blessed long ago. Weave them garments bright and sparkling; compass them with love and light. Fill, anoint them; send your Spirit, holy dove and heart’s delight.”

We are baptized with water, as Jesus was baptized in the waters of the river. And, just as in Matthew’s Gospel, God says of Jesus: “this is my child, my beloved”, so we, too, are declared to be God’s children through our baptism. Through his baptism, Jesus made us all the beloved sons and daughters of God. And in our baptism, we are each affirmed and singled out as a unique gift of God’s love. This is the light and love poured out on baby Jojo and her family this day.

To this day, when we baptize, we do so in the manner and the way of Christ Jesus himself. We become “water-washed and spirit-born,” initiated into the Church, incorporated into the community of God’s people, the Body of Christ, and commissioned for ministry to serve God in the world. In our baptism, we enter into covenant with Christ to love him by loving all those we meet, to continue his ministry in the world, and to worship him in prayer and song with the whole church.

It’s awesome to think of the things we do as Christians as somehow contributing to the Kingdom of God, isn’t it? Most of us are appropriately humble. We know that the part we play is quite small and seemingly insignificant. And yet, over and over again, the Scriptures show us that God in Christ takes ordinary people and transfigures them, transforms them, and commissions them and empowers them for the work of the kingdom. And as we realize that THAT’S what we’re doing in the name of Christ in the church and in the world, we realize that we are each vitally important. That what we say and how we live matters, big time. As those who are water-washed and Spirit-born, we have been called into the Kingdom of God, to live it NOW.

Today we welcome Jojo into this big, beautiful community of love, and service, and hope.

To God we sing: “O how deep, your holy wisdom, unimagined all your ways. To your name, be glory, honor! With our lives, we worship, praise! We your people stand before you, water-washed and Spirit-born. By your grace, our lives we offer. Recreate us, God, transform!”

Thanks be to God!

Notes: