

Transfiguration: The Sequel

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, March 6, 2011, The Last Sunday After the Epiphany.
Based on Matthew 17:1-9.*

The story you have just heard, the story of the Transfiguration, is a big Christian story and one that we have to deal with in one way or another. For those who struggle with physical miracles, happily it can be naturalized fairly easily. It is not hard to imagine Jesus caught in the blinding glory of the mid-day sun, his likeness affected by the magic that fast-floating clouds can play on such visions; we understand the unsettling lack of precise memory in moments of great emotion; we too have "heard" in the heart words that are never audible to others. Even if that accommodation is not quite enough to satisfy, almost anyone who acknowledges the breadth and vastness of the Jesus movement can admit that transformative, unforgettable moments must have occurred in the lives of these early believers for them to be so emboldened. If it didn't happen just like this, one might say, it should have.

The way, however, that the story has been memorialized in the church is much more otherworldly. It is particularly dear to us at St. Bartholomew's, for it is depicted in one of the masterpieces contributed by the Art Deco mosaicist, Hildreth Meière, an image that fills our apse, connecting us quite visually to this story: Jesus looking for all the world like Jesus should, banked by Elijah and Moses, adored by the startled Peter, James and John. It doesn't get any better than that.

Wonderful stuff, all of it. And, yet, if we regard this image simply as a once-visited and now largely romanticized vision, we—the church—risk becoming more and more a dreamy dalliance, otherworldly, out of touch, anachronistic, a cultural lag that we simply haul out on occasion to mark special moments. The risk, of course, is that we become a museum—a significant one in our case, so filled with substantial religious and architectural achievement—but a museum nonetheless. Museums can indeed change lives, acquainting us with nearly unspeakable beauty and artistry; but the church lays claim to deeper and more penetrating transformation than that.

All of which is to say that as we take our annual hearing of this remarkable story on the eve of a new observance of Lent, we do well to ask ourselves if indeed it is time for another, a new, a current-life mountaintop experience. How long has it been, we might ponder, since we have felt our spirits soar in the presence of a god-moment? Do we languish in a world of intellectualism and materialism that has left us people who have trouble imagining an encounter with God that would rock us to the core of our being? If that is true of us, then let us hear the call of God to get ourselves to a mountaintop. Quickly.

If hearing the story of the Transfiguration does nothing else but move us momentarily into a deeper personal search for God, then we have done a good day's work. But the message on my heart this morning is broader than that; it resides in a place that is deeper than even an important call to reignite our personal lives of devotion. In fact, I believe that this sweet story, only half believed by most of us, if truth be told, presents the message we need to empower the church forever, empowering it in a way that never becomes stuck in our beloved tradition but draws dramatic life from it. Let me tell what you I mean.

It seems to me that it is time for the church to go back to the mountaintop to either get some new operating instructions or more likely to hear again and with new ears the instructions delivered in "Transfiguration One." Surely I am not the only person who notices that we rarely turn people away, except occasionally from the shelter. We will have some lines on Ash Wednesday. I don't precisely get what all of that is about—the throngs of people who come. Is it superstition? Is it checking off an easily checked box? I don't know, and I don't care. I am glad they come and will happily stand here as long as they come, as happily as one can while reminding scores of people that they are dust and to dust they shall return. And we will have huge crowds on Easter and Christmas. Thank God; again, even if it is their annual or semi-annual visit, all good news for me. But despite those occasions, we rarely are packed; and it seems to me that the message these disciples received, whether on the top of the mountain which we have just heard or more likely simply in the course of their lives with Jesus, is a message that ought to bring scores of people into houses of worship every week.

Listen again to what the disciples, arguably representing the church, heard. From the *Voice*, presumed to be God, "listen to him, listen to the Beloved, my son," and from Jesus himself, "Get up and don't be afraid." The hope of the movement depends upon our willingness to hear these instructions again—in our context, in our time.

“Listen to him,” the Voice said. “Listen to him when he says things like:

- Love like you have never loved before
- Don’t let the least of those around you be without—no one can be hungry, thirsty, naked, or alone
- Be like children in your openness to and joy for life
- Don’t allow there to be any outcasts—every single person matters.

The church’s hope for remaining alive and vibrant rests on our belief, our knowing that Christ still speaks and that the instruction to listen to him still applies. If the moment of Transfiguration is locked in time as a beginning only, we are lost; but if it continues, there is no end to what we can become.

“Get up and don’t be afraid,” Jesus said to the startled apostles. So often found among the recalled sayings of Jesus, there can be little doubt that Jesus regularly said something like, “Don’t be afraid.” As one who is afraid of just about everything, there are no more encouraging words in the gospel. But Jesus didn’t say, “Don’t be afraid,” just so we will feel better. Jesus said, “Let go of your fear, so that you can really listen to me and follow my instructions for life even when it is hard and even when people oppose you, as they will.”

And from the very beginning it has not been easy. We have constantly attempted to narrow the love of God to make it compatible with our capacity to comprehend. When Peter implored Jesus to settle down on the mountaintop forever, he foreshadowed how hard it would be for us to truly hear the instructions given. Peter wanted to construct dwellings, little monuments perhaps, that would mark and preserve the moment, to keep everything just like it was. His was the immediate impulse of the church; and when we succumb to that inclination, we are a great danger to the coming of the realm of God on earth.

One of the dwellings Peter wanted to build was the altar of truth: “We have found it,” he seemed to say. “All that we ever need to know about what is true and correct exists right here, right now on this mountaintop. If we can just drop anchor and remain right here, the search is over.” My good Lord, how the church has lived and continues to live that one out. Every movement the church has made to broaden its understanding of truth in the light of progress or change or evolution has been made with fear and trembling and much resistance. Why? Because we believe that we must control orthodoxy and manage truth—that truth is a static possession of ours once we find it. Although we have been shown over and over that truth develops as we progress, we still resist the change.

A brief example: nothing has been harder in our present church culture than the notion of what is true about relationships. In a lighthearted way, Barbara Crafton, beloved priest and writer, observes in one of her writings this week the emerging truth about marriage: “Things seem pretty solid here at home,” Barbara writes of her and her precious husband, Q, “the week after the Justice Department announced that it would no longer defend the constitutionality of Defense of Marriage Act cases. So it seems that our straight marriage has survived the unspecified threats gay marriage poses to it.” Monuments of truth always must have expansion plans.

Given what we know about how hard it was for Peter to extend the Jesus movement to Gentiles, arguing in essence that to become a follower of Jesus a person had to first become Jewish, my guess is that another dwelling in his perfect world on the mountain was a monument of correct, precise Jewish worship and practice. There is every evidence that Jesus’ life was one of genuine Jewish piety, but there is hardly any evidence that he ever seemed to care at all if those he touched throughout his life changed their religious practice—their way of life, absolutely—but never much about religious practice. Does that mean that he didn’t care about it? I don’t know, but it does seem that we are the generators of rules about practice, not Jesus. Most churches, for example, require—at least in a rubric in small print—that a person be baptized before receiving communion. I ask you: from what we know about the life and attitude of Jesus, where does one find support for such exclusivity?

The Voice whispers yet, “Listen to him;” and still we must. And when we do, we can rise without fear to become the church we are called to be.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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