

Transfiguration Sunday
Sermon 2.26.17
Scripture:

Exodus 24:12-18

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

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

This is one of those stories that we hear every year. The Transfiguration: this is a story we hear every year on the last Sunday of Epiphany just before we begin Lent. A crucial occurrence in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Transfiguration of Jesus on this unnamed mountaintop serves as the capstone for the season whose purpose is to come to know who Jesus was—who he was and why he'd come.

And so we have throughout the season followed him so to come better to know him. We've heard his gathering and commissioning disciples. We've listened to his preaching, and considered its many, and strange, implications. And now this—a mountaintop gathering with Moses and Elijah, wondrous, dazzling. Connecting Jesus with the Law, as represented by Moses, and with the prophetic tradition, as represented by Elijah, this final revelation of the season of Epiphany signifies that Jesus is in keeping with ancient tradition, yet is also something new.

Wondrous, dazzling! No surprise, then, that Peter would want to prolong the experience. “Master, it is good for us to be here; let’s make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” I know I sometimes simply want to sit and to wonder. I’ll sometimes prolong some worshipful experience — arrested by the beauty of it all, seized by the majesty. I spent the week with my family and my sister’s family skiing in the Colorado Rockies, and at Winter Park in particular, on the second to last day, the views were stunning. Backed up against the continental divide, with the sun shining and the blue of the sky so many different deep shades of blue, I just had to stop and stare a few times.

But there was also the fact that I had to let the lactic acid drain from my legs. Day five, I was *tired*.

Maybe this was also true about Peter: maybe he was *tired*. It had, after all, been, I imagine an overwhelming few weeks — for Peter and the rest of them; an overwhelming and even exhausting few weeks — or was it months? — since they’d begun to follow Jesus. They’d been called and gathered, commissioned and sent out; they’d been given authority over unclean spirits, the power to heal, the power to teach. And they’d gone all over the place, all over Galilee, back and forth across the lake. And then, most recently, while praying with Jesus, Jesus had asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” and then, “Who do *you* say that I am?” And they had all sorts of answers, the disciples — that he was Elijah or one of the prophets or even John the baptizer. (John had been, not long ago, beheaded, so some supposed Jesus was him come back from the dead.) But Peter said, “You are the Messiah of God, the anointed one of God.”

What that meant to Peter is not known, not knowable. But we can entertain some ideas.

To be the Messiah is to be the one with ultimate power, ultimate authority (or at least *penultimate* power and authority). He’d be the one to bring justice to the long-suffering Israelites. He’d be the one to establish them mightily in their own land, setting low their enemies and raising high this people so often humiliated and now staging a comeback. Peter maybe supposed that Jesus would bring recompense, payback.

As for all those acts of healing, all the feeding the hungry and restoring the unclean: all that was maybe to get the people on his side. Maybe those good works of Jesus and of the

disciples on Jesus' behalf was to get his own nation at his back. All the wonder-working was by way of winning the people over, establishing his brand.

People love a strong man, a super man magician who'll do their bidding.

Or maybe Peter wasn't so cynical, so calculating. Maybe he could see the intrinsic value in all that Jesus was doing, and maybe he assumed (happily, hopefully) it would continue indefinitely.

Sure, because if Jesus *was* the Messiah, the anointed one of God, there'd be no stopping what good works he would do, what good works *they* would do. They could just go on and on in surprising, delightful righteousness, until they were old men together, wandering and wonder-working and making people feel *better*.

But after Peter's speaking this insight—that Jesus is the Messiah—Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. This, of course, didn't fit with the plan that the Messiah was supposed to live out, and it apparently didn't fit with the formulation Peter had since come up with.

But it wasn't even just that. It wasn't just that *Jesus* would suffer and die and be raised. There was also this, which Jesus told them as well: "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Now this had some claim on Peter, which hadn't been mentioned at that original call. Now this had a claim on all who'd follow Jesus, even those who'd begun before suffering and crosses were ever in utterance.

It was all pretty bewildering. First overwhelming, eventually exhausting, and now this, bewildering. Suffering? *Suffering?* For the Messiah? It just doesn't make any sense. What's more, it sounds pretty scary, downright frightening. (Remember, the cross was no mere symbol then. People didn't wear them on gold chains around their necks—either earnestly or ironically. No, the cross was real and it was terrifying. There was nothing pacifying, or even simply provocative, about the notion of carrying around a cross. It was to align with the enemy, with *evil*. It was to accept terroristic rule.)

Peter would have none of that, and he said as much, rebuking Jesus, "Lord, this must never happen to you." But that had Jesus rebuking Peter right back: "Get behind me, Satan. For you have set your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then he took Peter on a long hike—Peter and James and John.

It was actually six days later, that Jesus took Peter (and James and John) on a long hike — and who knows what happened on those six days. Maybe nothing. Maybe more of the same. Maybe Jesus pondered what to do with Peter, this most persistent and loyal disciple, this one whose persistent loyalty was starting to get in the way. And maybe Peter pondered Jesus' shocking rebuke of him. Hadn't he just wanted his friend not to suffer? Hadn't he just wanted his friend not to die an unjust, underserving death? Who wouldn't want such a thing for a friend? What a terrible thing if Peter couldn't have cared less? Perhaps there was six days of sting hanging in the air.

Then Jesus took the three on a long hike, and I know about these. I go on one with my dogs nearly every day. My hike yesterday was through the last remaining slush and ice, and the first of the season mud. Over an hour we struggled and moved through the landscape, along the river, at the base of the mountain. I remember thinking at the end it that it was just what I needed. To clear my head, to work through events of the last week — my sister, her kids, my kids, all at altitude, nothing big, just lots of little goings on — the walk had a way of opening me up and loosening my grasp on all the things that I was holding tight to.

It wouldn't surprise me to learn that Jesus meant to Peter to be opened up and for him to loosen his grasp.

We have no idea how long the hike might have been.

If it was a long one, though, it'd make sense that Peter would want to set up camp. To rest, to ruminate, to come to terms: it'd be no surprise that Peter would want to take a minute. "Master, it is good for us to be here," he said, he perhaps *urged*. For all the practical purposes of needing some rest, and for all the worshipful urges that the sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah, along with this stunningly transfigured Jesus, would spur in him, it's really no surprise at all that he said, in essence, "Let's stay here. Let's *stay* here. I'll build you three dwelling places — one for each. Let's just stay *here*."

Poor Peter. He gets it wrong again.

As it happens, this is the focus of much preaching on this story — that Peter wanted to stay, that he wanted to build a shrine. That he didn't want to go back down the mountain (at least not yet), that he didn't want to go down to where people in real need await relief, to where good works that make life better for people await being done, to where those condemned to despair or isolation were awaiting salvation and restoration, to where a

fractured world was awaiting reconciliation: Peter wanted to stay and worship more than he wanted to get back to work.

Yes, as it happens, much preaching will have this as its focus. Why, there's even a hymn that preaches this point: "Strengthened by this glimpse of glory, fearful lest our faith decline, we, like Peter, find it tempting to remain and build a shrine. But true worship gives us courage to proclaim what we profess, that our daily lives may prove us people of the God we bless."

And it's a good preaching point. God knows I've made it often enough. It's a good message certainly for any church that confuses its church building with the Church as a body gathered to serve as Christ. It's a good message for any seeker who wants to be inspired but much less so to be commissioned—and there are a lot of those these days. People who want beauty but not so much duty, people who seek deep spiritual practice but less so the sacrifice that fills such practice full: there's never a shortage of those who hope enlightenment won't actually cost them anything. So, it's a fine thing to point out about Peter to any of the privileged class who mean also to follow in the Way, even to be Christian: that to be a Christian will lay a claim on you, it will place demands on you and will even *cost* you.

But today, I don't see in Peter's longing to stay on the mountain a shirking of duty, not as much as much I sense fear of what that duty shall be.

No, today, I don't see Peter as lazy. I see him as afraid.

Last time Peter got it wrong, Jesus interrupted and rebuked him: "Get behind me, Satan..." This time, as Peter gets it wrong, it's God who interrupts him. Indeed, "while Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.'" So, you know, now he's really in deep. And, though the fact of God speaking to Peter would have been frightening in its own right, what God has to say makes it all the more so—for it points Peter back in the direction of the cross.

This, after all, is what Peter was to listen to, and what all the other disciples were (and *are*) to listen to, as well—this, which is the last thing in the story Jesus is remembered to have said: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering..." and "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." This is what Peter and the other two disciples on the mountaintop are to listen to, not to mention the several other disciples yet waiting down below, and all disciples who would follow down

through the centuries, including us. This is what we're to hear: talk of the cross, talk of self-giving love for the sake of the other, talk of faithful service and gracious outpouring, as opposed to, for example, survival at all costs.

It's surprising how alluring survival at all costs ever is, ever continues to be. Why do we need to keep learning this lesson?

Did you read the story in the *New Yorker* about luxury bunkers that some of the super-rich are building for themselves? In case all this goes down, in case all human existence is threatened and it's just a matter of who survives? Instead of using their money to invest in sustainable energy or to support the resistance against superbugs or nuclear proliferation or another world war they're building high-end bunkers for themselves.

I didn't read it because it would have brought out the worst in me, as if apparently has them.

I said earlier that the Transfiguration of Jesus on this unnamed mountaintop serves as the capstone for the season of Epiphany, a final revelation as to whom Jesus is and why he came to live among us. But it's not just that. No, the transfiguration is also the event by which the Lenten project that lies ahead of us is laid bare. We, like Peter, must prepare ourselves for encountering the cross of self-giving love—of being claimed by that cross and even commissioned by that cross to give of ourselves no matter the cost.

A few weeks ago I made the trip to Atlanta to record a radio program, one episode of the longest-running radio program put out by the Protestant Churches. I prepared a sermon to preach on the air and sat for a brief interview with the show's host, Peter Wallace. It will be broadcast, and podcast, the week before the 5th Sunday of Lent, so it was fitting that the final question Mr. Wallace asked me was this: "What do you hope people will have experienced or learned during Lent this year?" I hadn't prepared an answer because I didn't know this would be the final question. But I'm pleased with what came to me to say: "How to grieve. I'd like it if we could all learn how to grieve our losses, how to cope with tragedy."

This is, after all, what life often feels like—tragedy. The apparent inevitability of downfall, the inexorability of death, the near certainty that suffering will find us each and perhaps all: this is what life often feels like.

Easter insists otherwise, of course. Easter insists that tragedy isn't our ultimate end, that this isn't a human tragedy we're living out but a divine comedy, with a happy ending in

store for all, with reconciliation of all division and restoration of all that's been lost, with redemption of all that's been deemed wasteful or meaningless, of all that's been claimed by the nihil, the void.

Easter insists.

But in the meantime, things can seem awfully mean—which is made all the worse when our response to mean circumstances is further mean-spiritedness, a turning away, a putting the self first, a closing the vault door so *we* at least are safe, so *I* at least am safe.

This week, on vacation, I took a break from the news. It wasn't a conscious choice. When we go on a ski vacation, we *ski*, and it's tough to check the headlines when you're skiing, especially when your phone is as glitchy as mine is. But it was a welcome relief. That's what vacations are for.

That said, what this wide-angle view revealed to me is that, details aside, I'm simply sad at the cruelty that this new administration seems to have unleashed. I'm grieving the loss of civility, the loss of neighborliness, the presumption of good will that Americans have often had going on (and that drives the rest of the world crazy, our puppy-like optimism). Steve Bannon strikes me as a cruel man. Steven Miller strikes me as a cruel man. Donald Trump strikes me as someone who relishes seeming punitive, seeming harsh and intimidating. And I can't stand it. I don't want to live in the world as they seem to regard it and as they respond cruelly to it.

Lent, then, strikes me as a season for defying such cruelty, for resisting such a punishing impulse in favor of compassion, a more humane spirit. This is the challenge set before Peter—to listen to Jesus in all his talk of the cross and of self-giving love, or to follow his own urges of avoidance and self-preservation. This is a challenge as ever set before each of us—to watch out for ourselves or to live openly for the sake of all.

I have to say I'm shocked and deeply disappointed that so many so-called Christians have been easily given over to a punitive politics. But then I recognize what a daily devotional task it is to have it be otherwise, to be a disciple even when the cross stands in the Way. We do this every week—we worship and pray—because it's difficult and counter-intuitive, because it requires cultivation and not just going with more natural urges and drives.

So, I realize now, Peter was right. It *is* good for us to be here. To take a minute to pray in resistance of what might come more naturally to us, to take an hour to pray in hope of a

higher way of living, to let go the bitterness and resentment that so much in the world will breed in us, and to open ourselves up to the impossible possibility of grace and mercy, of kindness and love: Peter is right, it is good for us to be here.

The work that will come of this new frame of mind is out there and we'll get to it. God, we're listening to Jesus, rest assured. And we'll take up our crosses. We'll follow him. But for now, for *right now*, it is good for us to be here—for in receiving grace here we can be a means of that grace wherever we go from here.

It's good to be back.

Thanks be to God.