

Mar. 3, 2019 – (Epiphany 8, Transfiguration of Our Lord)

Sermon Text – Matthew 16:24-17:8

- Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it... 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!" -

Today, we come to the end of the Epiphany season. For eight weeks we have been looking at how Jesus' teachings and his actions reveal what the kingdom of heaven is all about. The transfiguration is perhaps the greatest of those revelations, as we and the disciples are able to catch a glimpse of Jesus in all his heavenly glory. But our reading begins, not with the transfiguration, but with Jesus telling his disciples that "if [they] want to become [his] followers, [then they will need to] deny themselves and take up their cross[es] and follow." He has just told them that he is going to Jerusalem. There he will suffer at the hands of the "elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." His implication is that this is the kingdom of heaven too. This is the kingdom of heaven in action. This is what the Messiah, God's chosen, will do for those who are claimed by God. It's all terribly confusing. It's not what the disciples were expecting. It paints a very different picture from that which the world might anticipate.

So, "six days later," Jesus takes the disciples up on a high mountain and is transfigured before the inner circle of his disciples, Peter, James and John. His appearance is changed to dazzlingly white. His face shines like the sun. And he appears together with the great heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah. I heard a pastor preach on this story a few days ago. He said that the thing that always intrigued him about the transfiguration was the question, "What were Moses and Elijah talking about with Jesus?" In Luke's gospel, we get a little hint. Luke tells us that they were talking about Jesus' "departure," his "exodus," his "journey." But Matthew doesn't tell us anything. He just says that they were talking. The pastor said that he has come to hope that what they were saying was "Jesus, we've never done things this way before!" He thinks that would make them representative of the disciples' and our worldly concerns. "Jesus, your talking about a big change in the way of doing things."

“Jesus, you’re completely reversing all of our previous expectations.” “Jesus, we kind of liked it when God ruled through earthly kings like David, and when God spoke through the prophets.” “Jesus, we’re not so sure about this suffering, dying and rising stuff you’ve got going.” “Jesus, maybe you’d like to reconsider.”

Of course, that’s what had gotten Peter in trouble with Jesus earlier. When we look back on that earlier story, we hear Peter confess that Jesus is the Messiah and be proclaimed “the rock” upon whom Jesus will build the church. It too is a glorious moment. But, when that happens, Peter does not yet seem to understand. Told that Jesus must go to Jerusalem, suffer and die, he objects. “God forbid it, Lord!” he shouts out, “This must never happen to you!” The idea that the Messiah should suffer is unthinkable. Peter is rebuked by Jesus. He is told to get behind him, to get back in line, to learn to follow. Now, in the transfiguration, we see through the eyes of the disciples, that Jesus is truly God incarnate. He is God in all God’s heavenly glory. And for just a tiny moment, the veil of human existence is drawn aside, and we glimpse the divine being who dwells therein. It is a momentary experience. Yet, it makes a huge impression on the disciples. Jesus’ shining face, his dazzling clothes, the bright cloud, the heavenly voice, all serve to fill them with fear. Here again is a rebuke of sorts. The voice from the cloud, interrupting Peter’s frantic activity to set up tents for Jesus and his guests, knocks him to the ground. He is again on the wrong track. He must learn his place in God’s plan. The disciples fall to the ground, I imagine, covering their heads, closing their eyes, or plugging their ears. The whole thing is overwhelming to them, but it begins a process that will lead to still more changes.

One of the parts of this story that often gets overlooked is that this is a transfiguration, not only for Jesus, but for Peter and the other disciples as well. Because of this experience, Peter and the others are different. They have been privileged to view the Lord in all his glory and they are called to a process of change which will take place over the weeks and the months that lie ahead. It doesn’t happen all at once. It takes some time. But Peter and the others are changed. They are transformed. They undergo a metamorphosis that leads to their true discipleship. When it is all over, Jesus comes and lifts the disciples up, sets them on their feet and reassures them that they need not be afraid. They are then set on the path toward true discipleship. And here is the pattern – they fail, they fall, they are lifted up again and they are instructed to listen to Jesus. This is the pattern that shapes the life of every Christian. We, too, try our best. Sometimes we succeed. Sometimes we come up short. We, too, have moments of insight and moments of denial. We, too, fall down in fear and are raised up again to

go forth in confidence. We, too, are called to listen, called to discern God's way in the world, called to partner with God and be changed. This is the beginning of our transfiguration. It won't happen all at once. It will probably take some time. There may be a few fits and starts along the way. And it may require us to take a chance on following a lead that feels a little uncomfortable. Only know this – God is at work in you to transform your life, to make you to be the disciple you are intended to be.

Amen.