

*Last Epiphany Year A*

*Lections: Exod. 24:12-18; Ps. 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matt. 17:1-9*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Good morning Grace Church! It is a joy to break open the Word with you again this morning, our last Sunday in this liturgical season after the Epiphany. In case you couldn't tell by the change in our altar hangings or by the sudden change in setting for our Gospel reading, we have reached another major moment in the church calendar. Since January, we have been with Jesus as he began his earthly ministry. And for the last three Sundays in particular, we sat with him as he gave his inaugural sermon on the mount, though a different mountain than the one featured in today's reading.

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the season of Lent, when we Christians prepare ourselves to join Christ in his suffering during Holy Week, mourn his death on Good Friday, and wait expectantly for the joy of Easter. But, we aren't quite there yet.

And to help us make the turn from the incarnation to the resurrection more easily, to move from Christ's crib to his cross, the lectionary readings for this final Sunday before our Lenten pilgrimage are always about Jesus's transfiguration. Notably, the transfiguration story appears in all three synoptic gospels of Mark, Luke, and here in Matthew, with only minor differences. In all three accounts, the Transfiguration comes after the disciple, Peter, declares his belief that Jesus isn't just any teacher or prophet, but that he is the promised messiah, God's anointed one, who has finally come to save the children of Israel and fulfill their hopes.

In all three accounts, Peter's confession is followed by Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection, which the disciples cannot fully comprehend. And in all three accounts, the Transfiguration is the pivotal point in the larger narrative, when the action turns away from Galilee and towards Jerusalem and all that will happen there. Yes, my friends, this is a vitally important moment in the gospel story.

It is also an astonishing moment. The word "transfigured" in the original Greek shares a root with "metamorphosis." And if you think watching a butterfly emerge from its cocoon is miraculous, imagine what it must have been like for Peter, James, and John to go with Jesus up a mountain and then to suddenly see him light up like the brightest LED screen, for his clothes to become unearthly white, for the two greatest figures in Israelite history, Moses and Elijah, to appear beside him, and for God's own voice to thunder from the heavens, "this is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased!" Yes, I'm sure I too would have been terrified. And the implications of the Transfiguration should still in some way startle us out of complacency, shake us up a bit, leave us a bit perplexed perhaps.

And if we are perplexed, well, we are in good company with the three disciples who stood closest to Jesus. Especially Peter, poor Peter, who perhaps because he was eager to double down on his commitment to Jesus, perhaps out of genuine shock, thought that this was the end-game. This had to have been what following Jesus for years had been leading to—a mountaintop experience unlike any other. "If you wish," Peter tells a divinely transformed Jesus, "I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

As is only natural, Peter wants to preserve this special moment. He wants to make it last as long as possible, by building dwellings, or in a more faithful translation, tabernacles. He knows this is a holy place, a holy time, with holy people, and so he wants to build holy buildings to contain it. He is so sure that this is the fulfillment of Jesus's ministry that although he didn't come up the mountain with the materials for these tabernacles, he assumes that the holiness will last long enough for him to head back down and come back up, with the rest of the Twelve, with all of the disciples, maybe, even, with everyone who ever doubted that Jesus was the Messiah. And then the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, will truly commence, as they worship the Transfigured Christ on this holy mountain.

But this moment isn't Jesus's end-game. This is not the final scene. The Transfiguration is only a foretaste, a teaser trailer, a down payment on what Jesus's ultimate transformation at Easter will look like. And that is why God, using the same words as at Jesus's baptism, interrupts Peter with a booming voice and instructs the three disciples to listen to Jesus.

For the road that Jesus takes down this mountain to head towards Jerusalem and the cross will lead not to conquering victory but to suffering. But suffering is not the end. It will lead not to acclamation by the crowds but to abandonment. But being abandoned is not the end. And it will to his death. But my friends, oh my friends, not even death is the end. Not for Jesus, not for Peter, James, or John. And not for us.

I pray we have all had at least one moment in our lives when something astonishing, startling, perhaps inexplicable has happened to us, however fleeting. I know I have. I have experienced some moments of unasked-for and perplexing grace, where the veil has been drawn back, and even if I couldn't quite put it in this exact language at the time, it was like God was shining all of Her transfiguring love, and light, and goodness onto me, if only for a second. Some of those moments have even happened when I was sitting in a pew like these ones, and I knew my life would never be the same.

But these moments of metamorphosis, of transfiguration, while beautiful and so deeply meaningful, are not the entirety of what the Christian life promises. Moments like that will be tempered with our own sufferings, our own moments of being abandoned, and, eventually, our own deaths. But those are not the entirety of life either. Because what awaits us all at the end is a transformation unlike any other: resurrection.

And so, beloved, we prepare to join Jesus once again on this journey through a Holy Lent. I pray that this upcoming season may be one where we let ourselves be drawn ever deeper into that bright shining light of God's transfiguring love, so that we can strengthen our faith in the ultimate transformation of ourselves and our world, all through him who loves us to the end. Amen.