

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
Transfiguration
6 August 2017

Scripture readings:

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:13-21

Luke 9:28-36

The Feast of the Transfiguration which we mark and celebrate today is significant and important in the life and in the cycle of the church year so much so that, depending on where you are and which church you're worshipping in, it could possibly be celebrated three or four times during the course of a year. It is read in our churches on the last Sunday of the Epiphany cycle before Lent. In Roman Catholic churches it is read on the second Sunday in Lent. In Lutheran and Episcopal churches, the churches that mark this day - the sixth of August, it's celebrated on the sixth of August. And I think there's even a further date that occurs in some of the Scandinavian churches. So there's the possibility of encountering the transfiguration four times in the life of the church year.

It's on the sixth of August for a couple of reasons. One has to do with a victory in the 13th century with one of the crusades over the Turks. But also the sixth of August is forty days before the thirteenth of September which traditionally in the church year is celebrated as the Triumph of the Cross which is believed to be the day on which Jesus was crucified. So, whatever the reason and however you and your tradition have marked this celebration, if it appears that often the guess is that it's important enough to remember.

Here we have this extraordinary story of Jesus on a mountain with his closest friends and something happens to him - apparently physically - which they see. And not only do they see him change, but they see him in the presence of other people: Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah were long dead by this time. It's felt by scholars over the centuries that Moses represents the law and Elijah the prophets. So here is Jesus appearing glorified and in majesty with the religious tradition that existed before him. And it's nice that we have the first lesson today talking about Moses himself being somewhat transfigured when he spoke with God in the Exodus text from chapter 34. When he spoke with God he was lit up while communicating directly with the Almighty, and lit up so much so that he had to play peekaboo - be covered with a veil - when he spoke to the people because there was a lively fear that if you ever saw God directly you would die. That was too much for anybody to survive or take or take in.

Somewhere along the line in my ancient history I remember it was suggested by a psychologist that the peekaboo game we play with kids has something to do with the rehearsal of dying - dead, gone and resurrected. Maybe, maybe not. But here is this peekaboo with Moses and the glory of God, and now these three of Jesus' closest friends see Jesus physically changed - bright, shining, inexplicably.

You may remember Moses when he came down from the mountain the first time with the Ten Commandments. He was so upset by what his people were doing that he smashed the tablets. He was the only one to break all Ten Commandments at once! *[laughter]* I just heard that the other day on TV.

Moses and Elijah represent the history of religious tradition. But we also know from the text today that not only did this happen in their present, it was related to what was coming. *"While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them ... Then from the cloud came a voice and said, 'This is my Son ... Listen to him!'"* They found Jesus alone and they kept silent, but what did they keep silent about? Because they knew where Jesus was going. As they were leaving, Peter said to Jesus, *"Let's stay here. Let's make this permanent. Let's build tabernacles."* And of course these guys are good at sucking up. *"Let's build one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."* They didn't care where they stayed, right? Ha, ha, ha. *"They appeared in glory"* - Moses and Elijah - and listen to this - *"and were speaking of his departure,"* of Jesus leaving, not of Jesus staying. There was nothing about this that was permanent. This was temporary. The past was present, the present was present, and the future was being anticipated. There is something to be said about the importance of transfiguration as something that occurs through time and not as an event that happened once and for all time.

You may remember that this is not the first time that we encounter a cloud and the voice of God saying virtually the same words to Jesus. Do you remember what the first time was? At his baptism the words were essentially the same, and there was a cloud.

In pre-Christian scripture a cloud indicates the presence of God. Here again it's this sort of peekaboo business. God can never really be seen entirely clearly by us. We get ideas but they're fuzzy. We have belief but it's clouded. We

have a sense of things but we don't know it all. For a moment Jesus and Moses and Elijah are bright. It's all clear for a moment. And they want to stay there because they like it that way. Who doesn't?

I often get asked questions and my only answer can possibly be: *You want a simple answer to a complex question.* Life doesn't work that way. That's why in our vocabulary we have the word *mystery*. There are some things we simply cannot understand. One of them is birth. Where, in fact, did you come from? How, in fact, did you happen? How do you happen to be here now?

And then the other great mystery - death. Where are they? Where do we go? What happens? And let me tell you, friends, I'm just as suspicious about people who have simple answers for these mysteries at either end of the life spectrum that we occupy as I am of the other. You may know, some of you, that I'm very impatient with pat answers about what happens after death because we simply do not know. Otherwise we wouldn't have mystery! And we *have* mysteries. Therefore we have God. There is, in fact, something larger than our intelligence. There is something greater than our ability to know. People have known that for a long time. The Israelites knew that when Moses talked with God there was stuff there they couldn't see or understand but that didn't mean that God wasn't there. And they knew God was there because Moses' face shone. He was different. He was enlightened.

But the thing that fascinates me about the text for today is that God speaks to Jesus from a cloud, from this divine presence, and says to those who believe something about Jesus, *"This is my Son. I am pleased with him. Listen to what he says."* And what does Jesus say to Peter, James and John who are with him? *"No you may not stay here. You may not enjoy this image, this beauty, this brightness, this clarity, this moment of great faith and elucidation forever. Don't bother to build your tent here. You must go down the mountain with me, having seen this truth, and take this truth with me into Jerusalem where I will be assassinated for speaking the truth to power."*

So what we have in transfiguration is an invitation to believe that you and I are always in the process as the Body of Christ of ourselves being transfigured, purified, enlightened, made new by God's word to us which is the same word that God spoke to Jesus, and it comes to each and every one of us at every baptism. *"You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased. And while you're a human being your job is not to be in heaven with me. Your job is to believe that I am going down into the world with you."*

So Jesus descends the mountain with Peter, James and John. He doesn't ask them to stay there with them. He goes down into Jerusalem with them to suffer and to die and to continue to do what he did - listen to God so that when others listened to him they would hear God speaking. And is that not our job? And is that not why we are here? Is this not our weekly mountaintop experience? We don't stay here all week, friends. We come here to hear God say to us, as God says to each of us in baptism - *"You are my beloved child. I am with you in a glorious, glowing presence which we encounter in the sacraments. I intend to be with you inside as we devour the elements of holy communion and outside as we are bathed in baptism. And I intend to go into your life with you until the end of your days."* And Jesus is saying with them, *"Until the end of mine"* which he knows are coming. They're going down into Jerusalem rather than avoiding the problem. They're going to face the difficulty with God's word and God's love.

So transfiguration, it seems to me, is an experience we as Christian people ought to be having all the time because we believe and teach and confess that together we constitute the Body of Christ. And what did the Body of Christ experience in the lesson today in the presence of all of religious history, in the present of being there with Peter, James and John, and looking toward the future of going into Jerusalem, we hear God say with the same words that God said to Jesus: *"You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased. Not because you're especially good, but because you are my child I am pleased with you. And I will be with you as you return to your world at the bottom of the hill, come what may."*

Now it seems to me, friends, if we start to really believe and enjoy the business that God is with us, that God calls us by name, that God is happy with us, then who really cares where we came from? And are you really worried about where you're going? If God is with us now, that should be enough! If God can get us here in the first place and be with us through our lives, well then when our lives come to an end, isn't it OK to believe that that mystery will continue to communicate God's love always? There's nothing about God that isn't eternal!

And so I prefer to think of transfiguration as a process which engages the entire Church all the time and that we as a church gather here to have our raiment cleaned, to have our faces brightened, to have our hearts enlightened and our minds filled with the knowledge of the love of God so that as we return to life in the knowledge that Christ goes with us, those who encounter us can be changed also by the same love that changes us and the same love that changed Jesus. I

think the premise of the transfiguration is that change can be seen in the face of those who believe.

There is a language that is universally understood. Without a word, a facial response can be understood by anybody who speaks any language and comes from any culture around the world. There were scientific studies done a long time ago about what facial expression was universally understood by the animal kingdom. Apparently it's disdain. You watch enough TV to have seen the Animal Planet programs where they say, "*Don't establish eye contact.*" I heard that with sharks this week. Eye contact with sharks? What are you doing in the water in the first place? *[laughter]* Don't establish eye contact with a bear.

Well, there is a universal language, and I think that that is the language of Christianity. You can either build a wall with your face or open holes in it. You can either exclude people or include them, and it's done by attitude and a physicality of expression. I don't have to speak your language to know whether or not you like me. That's transfiguration when we are allowed to give and enabled to give to the world the face of a transfigured Christ wherever we go. That doesn't mean to stay here all week. It means we believe that Christ goes with us for the rest of the week. And so as those who are bathed in the waters of baptism and hear from the cloud, "*You are my beloved child,*" so we are those who come to be fed by the living Christ himself and take him not only as our bath of cleanliness but as our food for life into ourselves so that those who see us the rest of the week may see the transfigured Christ in us and come to know and love the same God whom we believe knows and loves us infinitely.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.