

February 15, 2015
Transfiguration of our Lord

Mark 9:2-9

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Jesus stands together with Moses and Elijah. The Gospel stands alongside the Law and the Prophets. There is a connection to the old world, but a new day has dawned. There's a new light in the world, one that we can't ignore, one that changes things, one that means life will never be the same. The future is now. We're living in the Promised Land. And that Promised Land is bright, much brighter than any light we've known before.

We meet Jesus on a mountain, where the heights of earth approach heaven's doorstep. As Moses met

God on a mountain to receive the Law, as Elijah ascended to heaven as a faithful prophet, Jesus ascends a mountain, bestowed with divine light and divine authority as the voice from heaven proclaims, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Echoing the words spoken at Christ’s baptism, the Father speaks once again, this time in more than just personal affirmation of Jesus, but now in recognition of Jesus’ authority, as one we ought to listen to, as one with the right to rule, as the Lord.

Transfiguration Sunday is a watershed moment. Watershed moments are those times when multiple streams come together to form a formidable river. Not only does Jesus’ baptism echo within this passage. At the Transfiguration we have Moses and

Elijah coming together to support Jesus, representing not only the great leaders of Israel or the history of God's people, but also the very foundation of Israel's faith: the Law and the Prophets. Jesus' own Transfiguration, his otherworldly light, brings to mind the burning bush Moses encountered. As these waters crash together, the significance of Jesus begins to clarify.

The Transfiguration is also a thin place. The concept of thin places comes from Celtic spirituality, though the idea is expressed in many other cultures worldwide. Thin places are those where the distance between heaven and earth collapses, where spirituality becomes tangible. Places like the Grand

Canyon, where earth becomes otherworldly somehow, are thin places.

We cannot predict when these moments will occur in life, nor control the energies of these places. No amount of human strength can control the Grand Canyon, much less can we wrap our arms or minds around its formation. Sometimes the light of Christ blinds us as it surprises us in places of beauty and wonder. Sometimes the movement of the Spirit blows us off course, only to find new paths cut by the presence of God. But how should we respond to this watershed, to this thin place? What ought we do? That's a question worth considering.

Consider Peter's response as he sees the Jesus together with Moses and Elijah. "Rabbi, it is good for

us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” In our lectionary study this week, we considered the deep content of this statement. On the surface, something seems holy and hospitable about Peter’s reaction. He recognizes the blessing of the moment. “It is good for us to be here.” Not only in this place, but with these people. Peter sees Jesus alongside Moses, the one who led Israel out of slavery and into the Promised Land. Peter sees Jesus alongside Elijah, a prophetic leader who called Israel from disobedience back into the covenant faithfulness. And so, Peter asks that he might build homes for all three, that the Law and the Prophets and the Gospel might all stay close together here, to create an eternal thin place at the

heart of Israel. What could be better than this? An eternal moment in time, one where we might all know where to go and find God.

Yet, this passage also hearkens back to another scripture, another story of Israel's history, where humanity sought to build God a house on a high place. Here at the Transfiguration, Peter's response also echoes the Tower of Babel, one of the earliest stories about humanity's pursuit of relationship with God. You see, in ancient times, from Egypt to India, when people sought to build a temple they'd build towers with temples on top. That's why Buddhist and Hindu pyramids and pagoda temples have incredible stairways to a room on top, a space thought of as the God's home. Anyway, as these

early people sought to build the Tower of Babel, they sought to build God a house, but one for which God did not ask. They sought to control God, to keep God contained that God might always be found when they found themselves in need.

Peter's response is not only about hospitality. It's also about control, about building a dam to control this watershed moment, about building a fence around this thin place. Peter knows the gift of Jesus, the importance of Moses, the faithfulness of Elijah, and so wants to ensure that we all will have access to God when we need it. Peter imagines this moment is as good as it gets, and so wants to freeze time.

Of course, when we try to control God, even God's goodness, that also indicates we don't trust

the future that God has in store for us. If we stopped at the transfiguration, never would we come to the cross. If we stopped on this mountain, never would we come to the empty tomb. Sometimes, we're blinded by the goodness of God before us and can't imagine that such goodness could grow, could change, for an even better future.

What Peter can't imagine, at least not yet, is that we don't need to control God in order to have access to God. We don't need to build God a temple so that we know where to God when we are in need. In Jesus, God came to us in our deepest need. In the Holy Spirit, God makes our bodies and our communities the temple of the living God. Rather

than create gates for God, instead Christ makes us into living buildings for the Lord of life.

We come to moments like the Transfiguration not because we earned them, or deserved them, or controlled them. We receive these revelations only because God gives them to us, because God chose to share goodness with us, because God is faithful to God's promises. Think about the last few months at CLC. In only a few months together, we've developed new outreach ministries: Highlander Lutherans and Across the Spectrum. We've welcomed new members into our fold and seen worship attendance grow. We're in a new sanctuary, positioned for new ministry, with still new renovations for accessibility coming. These are good things.

Along with Peter, we may shout, “surely it is good to be here!”

But if we remain here, if we attempt to bottle this moment, to control the movement of God, then we forsake the future that God still has in store for us.

When Christ stands before us and reveals to us a piece of God’s glory, we cannot presume to control God. We don’t need to put God in a box. We can’t keep God safely on a mountain. God is the one who radically comes alongside us in our sorrows and our joys, who inhabits our pains and indwells our joys.

God enters our world not only to transfigure before us, but to transform our lives as well.

The Transfiguration signals for us an even brighter future, one where the Law, the Prophets, and the

Gospel point to the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. We may come alongside that future not by trying to control the present, but instead by giving thanks for God's revelations that we see and following God into the futures that we cannot yet perceive. The Transfiguration isn't the end of the journey. We're not meant to build houses here. Instead, it's an oasis along the way, one that refreshes us for the dry deserts of life, a light to prepare us for the darkness that is surely to come.

This is why the Transfiguration comes on the Sunday before Lent. We need this promise, this revelation, this light, for on Ash Wednesday, we remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. But only with the promise of the Transfiguration,

only with that light firmly burned into our memories,
can we recall that the God who leads us into the
wilderness is also the God who breathes life into dust.
Amen.