

SCRIPTURE

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. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

⁴ 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.'

⁵ 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!'

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ 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.'

MESSAGE

Today we celebrate the transfiguration of Jesus. We hear the word trans a lot these days – usually used in a different context, but the meaning is similar – it's a change in outward appearance. Ideally, this outer change is indicative of inner essence; transformation is less about renovation and more about revelation, and certainly we find this to be the case with Jesus' transfiguration.

As Matthew recounts the events that transpired on that mountaintop it's clear that he has an apocalyptic intent; this whole episode is a dramatic unveiling of Jesus' true identity: the bright clouds, face shining like the sun, dazzling white clothing, the presence of two of the heroes of the past, and most climactically, the voice thundering from heaven that drives the disciples to their knees.

This whole event drives home the fact that Jesus is no mere mortal; not simply a wise teacher or gifted healer. There is a supernatural glory that emanates from him; he communes with the dead; the very weather bows to him. And then there's God. In no uncertain terms God claims Jesus as his own son – his beloved son – and confers on him all authority.

When God said 'This is my son – listen to him' he was speaking in absolutes. He was giving absolute authority to his son over all things. God was not only speaking to Peter and the other disciples, who were knocked down by the force of his words, but to the clouds, to the mountain, to all of creation – even to the great Moses and the famous Elijah. Jesus was given all authority over all people, all of creation, all of the law, and all of the prophets.

It's no wonder that this is the text with which we end the season of epiphany. You'll remember that epiphany, which began the first week of January with the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem, is the season of revelation. Each week we learn something more about this Jesus who was born among the animals, and we culminate today with this ultimate image of Jesus glorified and exalted on a mountaintop.

But there is a part that we missed. There is something that the lectionary skipped over, and I think it's something important. It's a series of events that set the stage for today's reading and provides us with a great insight, if we are able to turn our eyes from the awesome and triumphal image of today's reading.

It begins just a few verses earlier than Jesus' mountaintop manifestation, after a showdown with the Pharisees and then the Sadducees.

Jesus asked the disciples 'Who do you say that I am?' The disciples muttered and hemmed and hawed until Peter blurted out 'You are the Messiah, son of the Living God!'

'Good on you,' said Jesus. 'You got it exactly right. Now don't tell anyone.' which must have absolutely mystified Peter and the rest of the crew. It's not as though they had been living a restrained and retiring lifestyle – they were engaged in a very public ministry as healers and miracle workers with Jesus in the lead, proclaiming the inbreaking of God's kingdom within the midst of the Empire.

So when they finally twigged to the fact that Jesus was the announced and anointed one who was to set Israel free they wanted to shout it from the rooftops. But Jesus said no. And then, to make things worse, Jesus began to explain to them that their next steps were to head to Jerusalem where he would suffer at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes. He would be mocked, belittled, ridiculed, and eventually killed.

Jesus said that he would rise again, but by this point Peter was no longer listening and pulled his master aside to assure him that no such thing would happen as long as Peter the Rock was there to stop it.

So, Peter's had a tough few days. He had his epiphany moment when he discovered that Jesus was the Messiah. He came crashing down almost immediately as Jesus told him he couldn't tell anyone, and then he bottomed out when Jesus filled him in on what was going to transpire in the joyful city.

So is it any wonder then, that when Jesus had his shining moment of glory a few days later, Peter was falling all over himself saying 'This is more like it! Not suffering and death but glory and God! Let's build some shelters and stay here forever!'

Peter's been on a roller coaster of exalted highs and despairing lows. Every time he thinks he's got a grip on Jesus he's thrown for another loop. It's no coincidence that it's Peter who has the experience of walking on waves with Jesus – that's emblematic of his whole relationship with the Christ. Up and down, sinking and floating, cocksure and then wracked with doubt. Peter the rock has no firm place to put his feet other than that one thing that he knows for sure – that Jesus is the Messiah. That's a whole series of sermons in itself, but not for today.

Today, all we need to focus on is how Peter tries to cope with the extreme ups and downs of these past few days. It seems that his strategy is to construct a particular image of Jesus and disregard everything that doesn't conform to it. Peter likes triumphal Jesus – *Christus Victor* as the Romans say.

He wants nothing to do with the suffering servant, or the lamb whose blood was shed for many. He refuses to consider Jesus betrayed, even knowing his own predisposition toward emotional equivocation.

There is only one Jesus that Peter will accept, and that is Messiah Jesus – Mountaintop Jesus. And so when Peter sees Jesus in full glory and splendour, shining like the sun, it is no surprise at all that he wants to freeze that moment in time, and never leave it.

I wonder if we do the same? Do we carry around a one-dimensional understanding of Jesus? Do we, for our own comfort and convenience, reduce Jesus to a single attribute or characteristic, and ignore those other elements that cause us distress or disquiet?

I think we do.

To a certain degree it is inevitable; there is no way for a finite mind to comprehend the infinite divine. Just look at the way we stumble over the Trinity. God is one, but God is three. There are three distinct and distinguishable individuals, and yet we cannot determine where one ends and the other begins. Can one exist without the others? They are differentiated, but are they different? Do they have divergent characters? Is it like Mom and Dad, where we know which one to approach when we want something?

To say that God is mystery is an understatement. God is certainly unknown; but God is not unknowable. God is constantly revealing himself to us. But we have to be open. We need to lay aside our preconceptions and simply and humbly observe.

When we choose to confine ourselves to a limited understanding of God we actually impoverish ourselves. Jesus said to Peter 'What you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' That's a lot of power and control.

What that means is that, for example, if our image of God skews heavily towards judge, then we will have limited our access to grace and forgiveness. We will spend our lives constantly in doubt and fear about our standing before God – we know we will never be good enough and

our insecurity causes us to become stingy, miserly - cold and cruel toward others. Our narrow knowledge of God blocks our ability to experience transformation.

Conversely, some of us err on the side of grace and love. We preach acceptance and validation with no expectation. The declaration that we are perfect the way we are and we are already good enough leads us to become self-righteous, smug, and elitist. Our assurance of our own superiority robs us of our need to grow and develop, and thus we remain spiritual infants – unable to experience transformation.

These are extreme examples, of course, but not uncommon, and they make the point. If a non-church person sat down with two Christians, one a Jesus-the-judge follower and the other an adherent of Jesus-the-forgiver, they would have a hard time concluding that both these folks belong to the same religion. And in truth, the two exhibit very different belief systems.

Which then leads us to ask ‘Are either one of them Christian?’ That’s a good question – one that I cannot answer. I’m in no position to judge other people’s faith, I’m barely sure of my own most of the time.

But Jesus did say ‘Small is the gate and narrow is the path that leads to life.’ That means that when we ask ‘who is Jesus?’ ‘Whatever you prefer or feel like’ is not the correct answer. It means that we can’t pick and choose the ‘Jesus that we like.’

There is such a thing as Jesus who exists objectively, who is much more real and constant than you or I, and who does not conform to our preferences or opinions. He simply is. This Jesus is much more complex than our one dimensional portrayals, and if we seek the path to life, then we had best seek out this complex, living Jesus.

Because the truth of the matter is that when we allow our desire to define Jesus we create an idol. Have you ever thought about that? We can have a Jesus idol. When we create a Jesus that conforms to our own expectation and inclination we are no longer worshiping the Son of God; we are worshipping a false god.

That is why Jesus’ response to Peter was so swift and seemingly harsh. When Peter protested against the suffering that was waiting in Jerusalem Jesus called him Satan – the deceiver. ‘You’re not thinking God’s thoughts,’ he said ‘you’re trying to conform reality to your own desire, and that makes you a fool.’

Likewise, a few days later on the mountaintop, when Peter saw the glory of the Lord he again said ‘Let’s forget all about that Jerusalem suffering bit – let’s stay here forever!’ to which God’s rejoinder was ‘Peter, You’re talking when you should be listening. You’re building an idol in the presence of God.’

It is very fitting that on the last Sunday of Epiphany, after all these revelations of the attributes and character of Jesus, that we conclude with this striking image that juxtaposes the ultimate glory of Jesus with the utter absurdity of Peter.

This should cause us to pause and reflect. Are there ways in which we turn Jesus into an idol? Do we caricature him, reducing him to the tame Jesus that we are comfortable with?

As we seek to be witnesses in Norfolk to Jesus' transforming love, the way we understand Jesus will affect how we represent him in our community. As emissaries and ambassadors, it is important that we are representing our Christ faithfully.

We won't get it all right all the time. That's ok. We're human, we have limitations. But the lesson from today is that we have no excuse for being willfully blind or ignorant. We cannot define God in a way that makes us comfortable and suits our purposes. Epiphany is about recognizing God as he chooses to reveal himself, in all his divine facets.

Jesus is not unidimensional – never was, never will be. He is a multiplicity, a complex living deity. He is Messiah, Lord, Master, Friend, Teacher, Healer, Lover, Listener, Lamb, King, Judge, Shepherd, Light, Vine, Water, Bread, Bridegroom, Cornerstone, Lion, High Priest, Deliverer, Mediator, Prophet, Redeemer, Counsellor, God with us.

Jesus is both encouraging and confronting, piercing and peace-giving, comforter and provoker. He is both our champion and our challenger. And it's a good thing, because we need both. We need a Jesus who will sit with us and wipe our tears, but we also need a Jesus who will send us back out into the world to try again.

We need a Jesus who forgives our failings. We also need a Jesus who calls us to be more than we are.

So, let's not limit our view of Jesus. It may seem expedient in the short term to reject those aspects that we find challenging, to make our lives easier – but easy Jesus will not save you, or anyone else.

Life, growth, transformation, and transfiguration come from the abundant and overflowing Jesus – the Jesus that is, rather than the Jesus we wish would be.

My prayer as we close the season of Epiphany and move into Lent is that you have experienced some revelation of Christ; a new aspect, a different facet - something disturbing and exciting that fleshes out your understanding of the Christ, and as a result makes you more real.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.