

Epiphany Last Year A Sermon Transfiguration

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. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 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!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

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."

At our Pathways of the Spirit gathering yesterday, we watched a TED talk by Jill Bolte Taylor¹ (a video we've shown in Adult Forum before). Dr. Taylor, a brain researcher, had a sudden and extensive stroke in the left side of her brain – the side of our brains that tells us that we are unique, solitary individuals, separate from one another. Our left brain is the fact-manipulating part of our brain, the part of our brain that labels things and people and puts them into categories: good and bad, friend or enemy, in-group or out-group. It is the part of our brain that differentiates, distinguishes, discriminates, decides. We could not survive in our world without it.

What Dr. Taylor discovered when she had her left-brain stroke was that all of these discriminating, judging, and individualizing functions were gone, and her right brain – which is the area having to do with relationships, feelings, beauty, etc. – was all that she had left. She describes how she couldn't perceive the boundaries of her own body; couldn't tell where her body left off and other people – or for that matter, the rest of the world – began. She felt at one with all the energy that was in the universe, and she experienced this unity as beautiful, peaceful, and expansive. It gave her a profound feeling of euphoria. "My spirit was free like a giant whale in the vast ocean," she exclaims. "I'd found Nirvana!"

So what does that have to do with today's Gospel? Let me suggest that the experience of Peter, James, and John on the mountaintop in today's Gospel was in some ways similar to Dr. Taylor's right-brain experience: for these three disciples, time and space were momentarily suspended, and they saw Jesus in a new light, saw a deeper reality, saw with "kingdom eyes." As Peter writes in today's Epistle, they were "eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty."² In that mountaintop experience, the air was alive with energy and light, and the disciples were drawn into it. No wonder Peter, James, and John wanted to save the moment! It must have affected their whole beings – mind, heart, and spirit. "Perhaps for the first

time,” writes Episcopal monk Curtis Almquist, “some things about Jesus’ teaching really made sense to these disciples... To use the language from the Letter to the Ephesians, ‘the eyes of their hearts became enlightened’ about Jesus *and* about themselves: what they were called to do; who they were called to become. In the moment, it all made sense to them. And they wanted to stay put. Quite understandably.”³ Peter, James, and John had left their fishing nets, their livelihood, their families to follow Jesus in his unpredictable, itinerant ministry. They never knew what strange new encounters they would have each day with this mysterious teacher of theirs. Amidst so much unpredictability and changeability in their daily lives, perhaps this mountaintop experience of transcendent glory filled them with the kind of peace and oneness that Dr. Taylor experienced during her stroke. And if so, it is no wonder they didn’t want to lose this moment, but wanted to build dwelling places right there on the mountaintop, to stay there. It reminds me of that marvelous song from the musical “Oliver!”, when Oliver Twist, the pauper boy who, after a very hard life in a London poorhouse and then living on the streets of London amidst a band of thieves, suddenly experiences the love and acceptance of a stable home and loving parents. He can’t believe the overwhelming feeling that “all is right with the world,” and he’s afraid that it won’t last. So he sings, “Who will buy this wonderful feeling? I’m so high, I swear I could fly! Me, oh my, I don’t want to lose it. So what am I to do to keep the sky so blue? There must be someone who will buy!”

But just as Dr. Taylor’s unitive, right-brain experience was accompanied by a lack of left-brain clarity, so these three disciples must have experienced the Transfiguration as a bit disorienting. Dr. David Lose writes: “It’s a confusing time [for these disciples], a heady time, an exciting time, an uncertain time. I’m not sure Peter knew entirely what to make of it. I’m pretty sure that *I* don’t either. The whole Transfiguration event can be a little hard to interpret...

“[We]... may, like Peter, not know quite what to make of it all.”⁴

But then Dr. Lose (always the preacher!) makes the connection to *us* in **our** place and time: “Right now,” he writes, “the world **we** live in is filled with a variety of confusing events, divisive rhetoric, increased tension, and an unclear picture of the future.”⁴

Dr. Lose believes that an interpretive key to the meaning of the Transfiguration for you and me can be found in the three commands that are given to Peter, James, and John in the midst of **their** Transfiguration experience. Those commands are: “Listen to him,” “Be raised up,” and “Do not be afraid.”

The first command is, “Listen to him.” “When the world seems crazy,” Dr. Lose writes, “we need more than ever to come to church and try to hear what **God** is *saying* to us. And while we may disagree on just what we hear – that’s the challenge of communal discernment, after all; we actually **are** a community, not

a monolith – yet we all agree that the best *way* to understand God is to look to Jesus and *listen to him*. To pay attention to what Jesus **says** and **does**, to whom he reaches out, to those he gives attention and help. Yes, we may not all agree, but... if we all keep trying to listen to Jesus together, ...we will get closer to what God intends for us.”⁴

Next, Jesus tells his disciples: “Get up.” “Except it’s *not* just ‘get up,’” Dr. Lose writes, “since the Greek verb Matthew uses here is the same word the angels declare to the women at the empty tomb: ‘He is not here; he has been raised!’ (28:6). So really, what Jesus is commanding his three disciples is ‘be *raised up*.’ Or even, ‘*be resurrected*.’ In the very midst of these confusing days that **we** are experiencing, Jesus calls **us** to get up, to be raised, to be resurrected. That may sound a bit overwhelming, but if we recall that God’s commands also carry power to fulfill the command – ... God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there **was** light (Genesis 1:3) – we might also hear in Jesus’ words a call to action that actually *gives* us the **energy** and **will** to act, to make a difference, to be about the works of mercy and compassion to which God *always* calls us.”⁴ When Jesus says to the 3 disciples, “Be raised up!” it is not just a *command*; it is a **blessing** imparting God’s empowering Spirit. Oh, it didn’t totally sink into the disciples at this point; it didn’t stay with them once they descended the mountain. **That** wouldn’t happen until the *next* time they see Jesus Transfigured: after his resurrection. **Then** it will fully sink in, and the disciples themselves will be transfigured more and more into the image and likeness of Christ.

Finally, Jesus says to his disciples, “Do not be afraid.” “This is the hallmark of the Gospel,” David Lose writes, “words perhaps never more needed than [here and] now. The fears that different people experience [today in our world] may be different. [Some may fear the] threat of terrorism, [some fear] the prospect of job loss, [some fear] the potential to betray our national identity and values, [or] the fading possibility of a better future for our children, [or] dread illness, unexpected death, the list goes on. **Fear** is a part of the common fabric of our lives, even though it manifests itself differently. And to *all* these different fears, the Gospel reply is the same: Because God is God of the past, present, and future, *we need not fear*. This is not... saying that we will have no problems, or that we will avoid all harm and hardship. Rather, it is recognizing that when we trust God for our individual and communal good and believe God is with us always, we need not fear... We *all* grow afraid at times, [and that doesn’t mark us as “unfaithful.”] Rather, [Jesus’ command, “Do not be afraid” calls us] to recognize that God did not create us for *death* but for **resurrection**, and so also God does not want us to be afraid but to move forward – even, and *especially*, in uncertain times – with courage and confidence.”⁴

Many Bible scholars note the similarity between the Transfiguration and the Resurrection of Jesus. Both events reveal his glory, both were initially frightening to the disciples, causing Jesus at both occasions to say to them “be not afraid.” But here is what we often miss: both also *call* us – and *empower* us – to

be raised to new life, resurrected life, transfigured life in Christ. “Be raised up!” Jesus commands his disciples – and us. As I quoted from C.S. Lewis last week, the whole of Christianity is about Christians becoming “little Christs” – resurrected, Spirit-empowered followers of Jesus, loving our enemies, as he does; forgiving as he forgives; caring for the outcast and marginalized, as he does; pouring out our lives for others, as he does.

Let me close with the words of Brother Almquist, as he summarizes the lesson of the Transfiguration for us: “You have been given power, the light and life and love of Jesus. Let it flow. Let it go. Don’t deny it; don’t conserve, restrict, tie it down. Let it flow. Let it go. There’s always more. Claim the power you embody – the light and life and love of Jesus – and let it flow with great generosity and authority through your own hands, through your own eyes, through your own mind, through your own words. We remember the Transfiguration of Jesus today to remind us all about our *own* transfiguration. “Christ lives within you.” ...Claim the power, and then don’t hang onto it. Let it flow. Let it go. The world is dying to know the power of God’s love.”³

AMEN

¹ <https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=yhs-mozilla-001&hsimp=yhs-001&hspart=mozilla&p=TED+Talk+given+by+Jill+Bolte+Taylor#id=1&vid=21eb1383b0f025ae980734653ace734e&action=click>

² 2 Peter 1:16

³ “Jesus’ Transfiguration; Our Transfiguration’ – Br. Curtis Almquist, Posted on February 22, 2009 <http://ssje.org/ssje/2009/02/22/jesus-transfiguration-our-transfiguration/>

⁴ David Lose, “Transfiguration A: Timely Words,” Posted: 22 Feb 2017 http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/transfiguration-a-timely-words/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+DavidLose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29