

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."

Some of you have watched that remarkable TED talk by Jill Bolte Taylor¹. Dr. Taylor, a brain researcher, had a sudden and extensive stroke in the left side of her brain – the side of our brain that tells us that we are each an individual, separate from others. Our left brain is the analytical, 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 massive left-brain stroke was that all of these discriminating, judging, and individualizing functions disappeared, and her right brain – which is the area having to do with relationships, feelings, beauty, etc. – was all that she had left, consciously. 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 is in the universe, and she experienced this unity as beautiful, peaceful, and expansive. It gave her a profound feeling of euphoria. She says, "My spirit was free like a giant whale in the vast ocean."

I wonder if 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? Was time and space, for these 3 disciples, momentarily suspended? Did they see Jesus, if only for a moment, in a new light? Did they see a deeper reality? Were they seeing with "kingdom eyes?" As Peter writes in today's Epistle, they were "eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty."² On that mountaintop, the air must have been alive, crackling with energy and light, and the disciples were enveloped in it! No wonder Peter, James, and John wanted to save the moment! It must have affected their whole being – 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 left-brain 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!” Isn’t that what is happening for Peter, who wants to stay on the mountaintop, building dwellings?

But just as Dr. Taylor’s unitive, right-brain experience was accompanied by a lack of left-brain clarity, perhaps these three disciples also 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... The whole Transfiguration event can be a little hard to interpret...”⁴

And to be honest, my friends, sometimes I read the news and look around at what is happening in the world – the craziness of our politics, the real threat that our environment and climate will be permanently altered, shootings in schools and Walmarts, the scary, uncontrollable spread of the coronavirus – and **I** don’t know what to make of it all, either.

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 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

So, the first command is, “Listen.”

Next, Jesus tells his disciples: “Get up.” But the Greek verb used here is the same word the angels declare to the women at the empty tomb: “He is not here; he has been *raised!*” (Matt. 28:6). So really, what Jesus is commanding his three disciples is “be *raised* up,” or even, “*be resurrected.*” And perhaps, as we begin the transformative season of Lent this week, Jesus is calling **us** to take this time of Lent to be raised, transfigured, resurrected. That may sound overwhelming, or beyond what we could reasonably expect, if we recall that God’s commands also carry the power to *fulfill* those commands – 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 *change* and to *act*, to make a difference, to be about the works of mercy and compassion to which God *always* calls us, but especially during the season of Lent.⁴ When Jesus says to Peter, James, and John, “Be raised up!” it is not *just* a **command**; it is a **blessing** *imparting* God’s empowering Spirit. Oh, I don’t think it totally sank into the disciples at this point; **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 the risen Christ.

So, the second command is, “Get up. Be risen into who you *are* in Christ and what Christ calls you to do.”

Finally, Jesus says to his disciples, “Do not be afraid.” It is an instruction we hear many times in the Bible, coming out of the mouth of God, the mouths of angels, and the mouth of Jesus. And I think *we need* to hear those words, and take them to heart, today. For, there is much fear at large in our world: the fear of the coronavirus, of people breaking into our churches and homes, of the decline of our health, the fear of death (not just our own, but the death of those we love), the fear that our finances won’t withstand some unexpected expense, the fear surrounding the future of our children and our world. **Fear** is a part of the common fabric of our lives, even though it manifests itself in different ways. And to *all* these different fears, the Gospel reply is the same: God is infinite love, God is infinite good; *we need not fear*.

That is not to say that we will have no problems, or that we will avoid all harm and hardship. Rather, it is recognizing that when we trust God with our individual and communal lives, and believe that God is with us always, we can *let go* of fear. Jesus’ command, “Do not be afraid” calls us to recognize that God did not create us for *death* but for **resurrection**. God does not want us to be afraid, but to move

forward – even, and *especially*, in uncertain times like our own – move forward with peace, courage, confidence, and love.

Listen to him. Be risen and transformed. Do not be afraid. They are commands that are as relevant to us today as they were for those three disciples on the mountaintop. And within those commands comes also the empowerment to carry them out.

Let me close with the words of Brother Almquist, as he summarizes, from his perspective, the lesson of the Transfiguration: “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://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_my_stroke_of_insight

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