

Sermon *Transfiguration* Sunday February 10, 2018

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, and His clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines - one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He said this because he didn't know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is My Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to Him!" Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, He ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Mark 9:2-9

There are celebrations and observances of the church year that are kind of universally accepted, like Christmas and Easter, and there are days like Transfiguration Sunday, and seasons like Lent, that seem foreign and opaque and tend to be ignored or dismissed by the culture around us. This Wednesday we'll gather outside in the parking circle between 6-8pm to receive ashes and to light candles and say prayers, as we begin the season of Lent. Lent has always seemed an unnoticed and underground season to me, I think because it's so inward. We wear ashes for one of the forty days of Lent, but the rest of this season is an internal, introspective time of spiritual inventory, and, if we are fasting or trying a new spiritual discipline, Lent is a demanding season. Lent seems like an underground season because it's a time of reflecting (and we're not a reflective culture) and a time of repentance (and repentance requires reflection and self-knowledge and humility). We - the church - need each other in the coming season of Lent, to pray for and support each other as we examine and care for our souls. There's a purplish insert in the worship program today that has ideas for observing Lent. For some of us it's a foreign concept that we spend forty days being more intentional about our spiritual wellbeing, forty days seeking a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.

It seems like Lent should be a season to wear something that identifies who we are and what we're doing... like ashes. In the ancient world, in times of repentance and sorrow, people wore ashes in their hair, and tore their clothes, and wore sackcloth, made of goat's hair.

I encourage you, in these next three days before Lent begins, to think and pray about what you might wear to identify - if only to yourself - this coming season of intense, inner spiritual work. I also encourage you to be in worship each of the six Sundays of Lent, because it's so hard to maintain spiritual intention and enthusiasm on your own. Every Sunday in Lent we'll be here to encourage each other on this journey of following Jesus into the dark and less-traveled places of the wilderness. By that I mean that before He began His public ministry, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, and Lent mirrors His forty days, as we too face our temptations, and our weakness, and the devil of our inner darkness.

This morning we've heard the story of the transfiguration, of Jesus on the mountaintop with His disciples, talking with Moses and Elijah (two prophets who had long been dead); of Jesus' appearance changing, His robes white shimmering with bright light. This is one of those stories that seems religiously opaque and culturally irrelevant, but let's see if we can figure out why it's important to us, as we are preparing for the forty-day journey of Lent.

Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus went up to the top of a high mountain. The expression "mountaintop experience" is used to signify something extraordinary, something supernatural. In front of the disciples, who were very much like us - willing to follow Jesus, but easily distracted, and clueless a lot of the time about His teaching -

Jesus was transformed, and He wore His glory. The disciples saw a glimpse of who Jesus would be after His death and resurrection: transparent, pure love, and light.

If you look at your worship program, you'll see that today's scripture begins with the words "Six days later". Before going up on the mountaintop, Jesus had told His disciples that He had to suffer and be rejected by the religious authorities, and be killed, and be raised again from the dead. Peter reprimanded Jesus for saying this (maybe up to this point Jesus hadn't said anything too offensive to Peter, but this suffering-and-death-stuff was too difficult to hear, too opaque and foreign, and he tried to argue Jesus out of it.) This is from Mark, chapter 8: "Then turning and seeing His disciples wavering, wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works." Calling the crowd to join His disciples, Jesus said, "Anyone who intends to come with Me has to let Me lead. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow Me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, My way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you?"

Jesus' words about surrender, and suffering, and death, weren't the only difficult words to hear. He told the crowds around Him that to follow Him they must take up their cross... they must live the life that the religious establishment, and the crowds, and all humanity has rejected: the life of love and service and mercy and peace. These are God's ways. They don't come naturally to us, and so to live them is to live a sacrificial life. Actually without God's help, and without our faith community, it's impossible to live this life.

And because it's so difficult... and it seems to make so little difference to the greed and violence and power-grabbing and hatred in the world... why do it? I think this is the clue to why this story of the transfiguration is important to us. We follow Jesus most faithfully, and persistently, and with the most hope, when we've experienced His love and presence with us. Can you put your finger on that time, or those times, when you've known Jesus? When you're been alight with His love? When you've felt His presence and His peace? These are mountaintop experiences, and we need them. We need more than a bible or a preacher: we need to experience Jesus Christ. We live most of our lives in the flatlands, and sometimes in the valleys, and those mountaintop experiences of feeling filled and transformed with God's love are rare, and... they keep us going. They keep us following Jesus, hungering and thirsting for His love... for His acceptance, His mercy, His grace.

Jesus had told the crowd that following Him meant picking up the cross and denying themselves. The apostle Paul referred to human nature as "the flesh" but ego is a better word. Jesus said that living God's way, the way of sacrificial love and service, requires that His followers deny their self-centered, sinful human nature. (I believe this was said with love and compassion, because although we are those things - selfish and self-centered - God loves us.) Now, Mark doesn't tell us if the crowd groaned when they heard Jesus' words, or if some of them walked away, but he does tell us that six days later.... Jesus took His closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, up to a mountaintop. And there on the mountain, they saw Jesus transformed - radiant, transparent, the glory of God revealed - and Jesus, the embodiment of God, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, the embodiment of the Law and the Prophets.

Mark says that on the mountaintop the disciples were terrified. The Greek word is “ékphobos” which means “frightened out of one’s wits.” A mountaintop experience, a supernatural experience, an encounter with the living God can shake you, and scare you, and make you feel vulnerable. The disciples felt all those things. And maybe because they were surprised and frightened and vulnerable, they were able to hear the voice from the cloud that shadowed them. The Israelites, wandering in the desert for forty years, had experienced God’s presence in a cloud. And here again was a cloud both hiding and revealing God, and it said, “This is My Son, the Beloved; listen to Him!” In spite of their overwhelm and fear the disciples must have received the voice of God as reassurance that this mountaintop was real. And in the days to come, the disciples must have remembered, individually and together, that the voice of God confirmed what they’d seen, their friend and teacher, Jesus, revealed as the Risen Christ.

Jesus and His disciples then walked down the mountain, and into the valley of death... because Jesus already knew what was coming. He had defied the power and authority of the religious and political establishments, and He knew that He was walking down the mountain to a face-off with them. His disciples would also be confronted by these powers, and they would scatter, run away, deny Him, and go into hiding when Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified. But they would not forget the transfiguration on the mountaintop - seeing the glorified Christ - because it changed them.

To learn something and really take it in is referred to as “wearing it.” It means that what you’ve learned has become part of you, how you understand the world, and how you see yourself. The transfiguration of Jesus, His clothes and His person shimmering with light, transformed His disciples too. They experienced a mountaintop where the

glory of God was revealed in Jesus, and they were not the same afterwards... they wore that experience. Later, although they would betray Jesus, and deny Him, and abandon Him, they would also meet Him again, transfigured again as the Risen Christ, and they would become the first Christians, the first church.

Their stories of Jesus' transforming love are now our story. And because they had a theophany on the mountaintop (a theophany is a manifestation or an appearance of God) we know that we can too. We know that ordinary people can experience the earth-quaking, heart-bursting, soul-filling love of God in an encounter with Jesus Christ. And it can transform us. And when we are transformed by the love of God - when we wear the love we experience from Jesus - the people and the world around us can be transformed too. This is slow work, the work of being transformed by God love, and one of the reasons we're willing to do this slow work is because we've experienced the love of Jesus Christ: unconditional, merciful, demanding, forgiving love. And we want more of it. St. Augustine, one of the early church fathers, said, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in You."

We have been reluctant to talk about our theophanies, our mountaintops, our experiences of God's love and presence. But Jesus is with us, and God's glory is revealed to everyone who has eyes to see, and telling others about our experiences of God, while we're practicing our Christian faith through acts of sacrificial love and service, are gifts you and I bring to our surrounding culture and to all the cultures of the world.

During the forty days of Lent followers of Jesus make changes in our lives. That purplish insert in the worship program suggests some changes, and there are many

other spiritual practices you can experiment with. Why? And why did we hear this story of the transfiguration on the last Sunday before Lent? We practice spiritual disciplines, and live more intentionally in the ways of God, to experience more of God. We practice seeing God - we train our hearts and our eyes and our ears for theophanies, for manifestations of God - so that God's love and mercy become part of us, and how we understand the world and see ourselves... so that we can "wear" what we know about God.

We heard this story of the transfiguration of Jesus on this last Sunday before Lent because on that mountaintop Peter, James, and John encountered God, because God wanted to encounter them. God wants an encounter and an experience with you even more than you want an encounter and experience with God. God created you with a God-shaped hole in your soul that only God can fill. And you and I and all humanity try to fill that hole with noise and food and activity and worry... and still and always God looks for ways to encounter us, to take our breath away, to shake us out of our complacency, to reveal God's Self to us, so that in those vulnerable moments our hearts are open to God's love, God's peace, God's presence, God's kindness, and it transforms us... it shimmers in us.

I hope you'll come on Wednesday evening and receive the imposition of ashes as Lent begins, to be reminded that we were created from dust and will return to dust... that life is brief and precious... that we were made in the image of God and there is a divine spark shimmering in each of us. Lent is a season for you to sift through the dust, and clear space in your soul, to experience the transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Before we begin a time of prayer, let's be in silence to reflect on what spiritual practices we need during Lent... some of them are on the insert... and some will be revealed to you in the silence of your soul. Amen.