

Sunday – March 6, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **The Transfiguration**

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Matthew 17:1-9

Six days after Peter announces that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is leading Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, up a high mountain.

Let's start with this. The gospel writers don't name the mountain. Some people think it may have been Mount Sinai or maybe the mountain of the Sermon on the Mount. But, it wasn't important enough to record in the New Testament.

Going up a mountain is symbolic of getting closer to heaven, closer to God. Just about every religion has a sacred high place where its adherents can make a pilgrimage to meet God:

Mount Olympus - ancient Greeks Mount Fuji – Shinto

Uluru (Ayers Rock) - Australian aborigines

Several of the peaks in the Himalayas - Buddhists and Hindus

Mountains throughout China - Buddhists and Taoists

Machu Picchu - Incas

Mountains bordering traditional Navajo land

Denali (Mt. McKinley) - local native Americans

Mt. Zion, Mt. Sinai, Mt. of Olives, Mt. Ararat - Jews and Christians

There are many other mountains sacred to all sorts of indigenous religions, and more that are special to the major religions. The National Cathedral in Washington, DC is built on Mount Saint Alban, for instance. But, the fact is that we are no closer to God on a mountain than we are in the deepest cave beneath the earth. But, it can certainly inspire feelings of closeness to the Holy. So, when Jesus wanted to make a very special point about who he is, he leads his inner circle up a high mountain.

Jesus is transfigured (literally metamorphosed). He glowed with the transcendent glory reserved for heavenly beings. The passive voice indicates that the Father does this to the Son, makes this revelation to his disciples.

Along with Jesus are Moses and Elijah. Why? We could start with Moses representing the Law, the most ancient writings of the Hebrew Scriptures. And Elijah would then represent the Prophets. There is also a sense of chronological continuity, with Moses dating to the 13th century before Christ, and Elijah dating to the 9th century BC, and Jesus in the first century AD.

There are other connections. Both Moses and Elijah, like Jesus, were originally rejected by the people they were supposed to lead, and then were vindicated by God. Like Jesus, they both performed miracles. Now, here's something that wouldn't be obvious to us: to first century Jews, they were both considered to have been taken directly to heaven instead of dying on earth. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire after passing the mantle to his successor, Elisha (II Kings 2). But, what about Moses? He dies and is buried in Deuteronomy 34. But, according to both Philo in his book, *Life of Moses*, and Josephus in his book, *Antiquities of the Jews*, he did not actually die, but rather was carried directly to heaven. These two authors were writing during the first few decades of Christianity, and the Jews of Palestine would be familiar with their very popular writings. So, for Matthew's original audience, this would have been one more thing Moses and Elijah had in common.

Peter is always willing to take charge. So, he suggests that the disciples build three "dwellings" for the three beings standing before them. But, the word for "dwelling", which can mean just a common "tent", also can mean "Tabernacle," the large tent where God lived on the Ark of the Covenant as the Hebrew children roamed through the desert on their way to the Promised Land, or "hut", a temporary shelter built for the Jewish Feast of Booths. So, there may have been more to Peter's suggestion than meets the 21st century American eye.

God seems to be responding to Peter's suggestion by coming in a cloud, just as a pillar of cloud led the Hebrews through the desert and rested on the Tabernacle (as well as the Temple - the permanent successor to the sacred tent in Jerusalem). Then God's voice comes from the cloud, just as it did on Mt. Sinai for Moses, confirming the confession Peter himself had made in Matthew 16:16. More on this later.

This voice of God, which also reminds us of Jesus' baptism, ignores Moses and Elijah, telling the disciples to listen to Jesus. In the OT, hearing and obeying often go together, so it's more than just paying attention to Jesus. It is also following where he leads and going where he sends. Finally, the disciples fall on their faces, not an uncommon fearful response to God's presence in the OT.

Then, Jesus comes to his disciples, as only one other time in Matthew. The other time he comes to them is in Matthew 28:18, when, after his resurrection, he appears on a mountain (!) in Galilee and gives them the Great Commission before ascending into heaven.

When he touches them, they look up and see Jesus "alone." Without Moses or Elijah or the shining face, the fact is that he IS the Tabernacle, the reality of God's abiding presence with us. So, when the disciples descend the mountain to return to their everyday lives, in Christ, God remains with them.

On the way down the mountain, Jesus instructs them not to mention their vision to anybody until after his resurrection. If we give this a moment's thought, it makes perfect sense. The Transfiguration cannot be understood until Easter, from our side of Easter.

The story of the Transfiguration follows, as I mentioned at the beginning, the story in chapter 16 in which Peter blurts out that Jesus is the Messiah. Let's take a look at that passage (Mt. 16:13-23).

Jesus is trying to explain to his own disciples the meaning and cost of discipleship. They don't get it. Peter, having just been given the keys to the Kingdom, feels special enough to correct Jesus as he predicts his own suffering and death. Jesus chastises him for not thinking of divine things, but only of human things. Perhaps just as important, he is thinking from a human point of view. This is understandable, since at the time, that's the only point of view available for him.

But, think of the Transfiguration as a glimpse of the resurrection, the Easter that follows the Good Friday of his crucifixion. The good news for Peter, and for all of us, is that through the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, Christ can now open our minds to the divine revelation of the truth of who Christ is, what that means for us, and how we can be in relationship with him.

We can now transcend the human point of view and start to see things from Christ's point of view, the heavenly point of view. And when we do this, we can find Christ in ourselves and in everyone else. So, we can be Christ to those who need it, and uncover Christ in those we find so difficult to love.

I say "uncover" because it is not always easy to see Christ in someone else (or in ourselves, for that matter). We must be willing to make the effort to excavate our way down to where they are hiding Christ, sometimes. But, that's our calling. We have to dig with all our might, otherwise, what are we saying about those unlovable people? They may be children of God, but not worth the trouble to get to know in that way? That is the sort of attitude that makes Jesus weep over his Church and his Christians out in the world.

We don't have Peter's excuse for our narrow human point of view. We **know**. We have heard the truth. We have read it for ourselves. What would we say if Christ asked us, "How hard did you try to find me in my brothers and sisters, even the least of them?"

Sure, it's hard. That's why so many Christians don't even make much of an effort. But, with Christ's help, we can find him in the most vile person we meet. So, let's haul out the digging equipment, and with prayer give it our very best shot. The upcoming season of Lent may be an excellent opportunity to look inside ourselves and ponder why we hesitate to make that effort. I believe Christ assures us it will be worth it.