

“Transfigured, Transformed, Translated”

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March 2, 2014

Matthew 17: 1-9

It is not uncommon for someone to ask me how we decide what to preach on each week or how we pick the Bible verses that we read. On most Sundays, the scripture we read is decided for us by the Lectionary, a cycle of readings from the Bible that spans three-years. It is helpful in that each week we have a few choices for scripture readings instead of thousands. But it can be challenging because the lectionary assumes that we all know our Bible. It can skip around between stories, or it will start in the middle of one, just offering up an excerpt. If we aren't intimately familiar with the Bible, we end up missing some of the connections or wider stories that the lectionary assumes we already know.

Case in point, this morning's Gospel reading is one of those passages. On it's own, the story of the disciples going up high on a mountain and witnessing the transfiguration of Jesus seems like a complete story. It is certainly one full of mysticism and wonder and awe. But, in order to better understand this moment, it is important to know that right before this happened, the disciples had just found out for the very first time that Jesus would suffer, be betrayed, and be killed. Jesus told them this himself.

I can imagine their confusion and despair as they try to understand or make sense of this news in a way that doesn't mean losing their friend or doesn't mean Jesus would suffer. I can picture the fog of depression and grief that must have settled over their group as they headed up that mountain, still following their friend at the same time that they feared for his life. It is important for us to know what they are feeling and what is going through their minds as they take that journey and as we journey with them because it completely transforms what happens up there.

When you don't know what is going through the disciples minds, it makes it harder to follow along on the mountain. It makes it so that we read this story, in our reasonable, logical modern 21st Century way, and we might get stuck on the “What *exactly* happened? How do Moses and Elijah fit in here?” We might look for the technical details of the story and forget that this is a story about friends who are grieving. It's a story about friends who have just heard the worst news possible and are processing their feelings, their fear, and their sadness over the future moment when they know the person they most admire in the world will be killed.

That knowledge makes all the difference. Because I believe that what we are supposed to take away from this story that has been tenderly passed down between Christians and retold over centuries is that when you are in your darkest place, when you are down farther than you ever thought you would go, when you are dreading tomorrow and filled with the sadness over the knowledge that you will lose your best friend....God will break through the shadows of your grief and depression and angst. God will break through with light that shines brighter than you feel like you can handle. God will find a way to demonstrate to you that there is something more to come.

God dazzled the disciples on that mountain. He lifted them out of their fear of what would happen to Jesus and he showed them who Jesus was. God transfigured Jesus to show that yes, Jesus would suffer and be killed but that did not define him. Jesus is light. Jesus is love. Jesus' life would be so much bigger than an act of betrayal and violence—that his life's work and ministry would make connections with the past prophets and then carry the disciples into the future. The transfiguration was a message telling the disciples that when there is grief and pain, God will be there, moving and transforming your life until you are once again dazzled by the possibility of hope.

For the disciples who witnessed the transfiguration it was an important moment for them. It helped them come down and proclaim the glory of the life that Jesus has left, instead of going in hiding and dreading the end. It allowed them to hold their grief close to them, because it didn't leave them, but they could hold that next to the promise that there would be something greater to come. It

reminds me of how when a movie or a tv show gets too tense or worrisome for a young viewer, and the tension begins to consume them, a parent might break that tension by giving them a preview of what is to come, They might say, “It's going to be okay. The endless winter will pass and spring will come. There will be a happy ending, even if it doesn't feel like it right now.”

When we have these tension-breaking and life-affirming moments we often don't realize their importance until after they have passed. It is hard to name or recognize what they are for us until later, but when we look back, they are there. It is the moment after losing a loved one when we realize the sun is once again rising or even though we thought our heart would literally break with pain, we are able to breathe again. It might be a small incident, or it might be something that dazzles us, but it is the recognition that despite the pain and the grief, there is beauty and there is love and they are still waiting for us. We will still be able to climb up the mountain and be blinded by the glory of God.

Yesterday, I saw Diana Butler Bass speak to UCC churches from all over Massachusetts and Connecticut and her talk really resonated with me when I think about that journey from grief to hope. She named a reality that many communities are facing of declining church membership, buildings in disrepair, and dwindling endowments. There churches that have had to close their doors after hundreds of years of faithful service. With this decline comes tremendous grief as people realize they will never again stand before the altar where they were married or pass by the font that holds the holy water that baptized their children. They grieve the loss of beloved buildings, but more importantly they grieve the community that has long been gone, scattered to different places, maybe new churches but maybe not. They miss the relationships and the people that walked with them through life in a particular kind of way.

Diana Butler Bass named this reality that some people at this conference were feeling, and then she offered them the glimmer of hope—the possibility for transformation—that we all desperately needed to here. She is a historian and has been studying in earnest the moments when

the way we understand church has radically shifted and broken open into something new. We call these Awakenings, and she believes we are living in the midst of the Fourth Great Awakening. She said that it's not that the church is dying around us, it is transforming. People understand God in new ways, which makes them seek out different kinds of communities. So while there is continued grief for the churches that have been lost, there is still life in religion—it just looks different. She said that in an awakening, things appear to be getting smaller while really getting bigger, and that is Good News for many churches. She named that churches are on the journey up the mountain, not sure what awaits them, but she delivered the message that what we find will be Good News and an indication of new life.

It is Good News even for us when we feel a pinch or a strain we are not used to or we worry that people don't understand the importance of our traditions, there might be something new waiting to break forth and give us a new understanding of who we are called to be as a church. It might mean that as we grieve for the way things used to be, God will break forth and show us a new vision. We might not fully realize what that is in this moment, but Diana Butler Bass believes this is one of those time periods we will look back on and understand was our mountain top moment of being dazzled by God. She believes that this is not the end, and that death will not have the final word, but that the table we all gather around will only grow bigger. We need people like her to remind us of the life and the possibilities that await us—that slowly move us from places of longing for the past to anticipating and shaping our future.

It's not a coincidence that this is the week we are learning about the transfiguration of Jesus and the transformation of his disciples. This week in the life of our church we are entering the season of Lent, those 40 days before Easter when we journey with Jesus in the wilderness and journey into our own wildernesses. Lent is an invitation to examine our lives and take an honest look at the things that keep us separate from God and from living a whole, authentic life. Lent is about naming the ways we compromise our values and integrity and trying to live in a new way. It's

doing hard work with yourself and for yourself. For many people, it can be an opening of old wounds or entering into the places within ourselves that we don't like to go to.

The transfiguration of Jesus is always the last story we hear before we enter Lent because it is our reminder that it is okay to go deep inside us to our darkest corners because there is something great that will be waiting for us on the other side. It is our preview of the resurrection to come so that if we go to a place that brings up feelings of mourning or sadness that we know the hallelujahs and the hope of Easter Sunday will be waiting for us. If we walk through these final weeks of winter, the crocuses will once again spring up from the earth and the snow will melt and spring will encompass us.

I invite you on a Lenten journey for the next month and a half, starting this Wednesday. Know that it can be a difficult journey, but we have seen the glory of God and God's glory will be waiting for us once again, to carry us forth stronger and more whole than before. We have God's promise that God will be with us on the journey, and we have seen the evidence that God transforms despair into hope. The invitation is to follow the disciples down from the mountain, with the courage and the tenacity to face a new, unknown day.