

Transfiguration Sunday – February 19, 2023
Matthew 17:1-9

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Grace, mercy, and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday was a beautiful sunny day. Actually, we've had a few sunny days recently, but yesterday I noticed it. Maybe that's because it got a little bit warmer too. I don't think I suffer from seasonal affective disorder – you know, where the shorter days and gloomier weather of the winter months has a strong negative influence on a person's state of mind. But there's no doubt that a sunny day tends to lift my mood when there hasn't been sunshine for a while. I know I'm not the only one. I think it's safe to say that this is a more or less universal experience, at least in places where it's not sunny all the time, and it has made its way into the way we speak, across cultures and throughout time. When we say that someone has been a ray of sunshine, we mean that they have cheered us up or done something nice for us. When we call someone gloomy, we mean that they are pessimistic or depressed. To say that there are dark days ahead is to be ominous and foreboding. To say that the future is bright, on the other hand, is to be encouraging and hopeful.

This kind of imagery is imbedded in the Bible too. The first thing that God creates in the first creation story is light. Then God shows up on Mt. Sinai in the Exodus story in a blinding light, which rubs off on Moses so that his face shines when he comes back from talking with God. Both Jesus' disciples and Matthew's original audience would immediately have thought of that when confronted with Jesus' transfiguration, his face shining like the sun and his clothes a dazzling white. And there are numerous other examples of the light and darkness theme. Isaiah compares sinful humanity to people walking in darkness and promises that God will send light. John speaks of Jesus as the light shining in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome. The crucifixion and resurrection stories of the Gospels are full of references to darkness and light. And the final image in the Bible of the good future that God has in store for us is of a reality in which there is no more night. We won't need the sun or moon, the lights of creation, because God will be living in the midst of us, lighting up everything.

There are three things to notice in this Transfiguration text this morning, and that is the first of them: that this light imagery is unmistakably showing that God is at work here in and through Jesus. Jesus' shining face and dazzling clothes make that abundantly clear. But just in case that's not enough, we also get Moses and Elijah, the two most important figures in the Hebrew scriptures, representing the law and the prophets, the sum total of God's activity up to now. The message could not be clearer. What Jesus is up to is a continuation of what God has been doing from the very beginning. But then, in case *that's* not enough, just in case we're not good at allusion and imagery, God speaks directly from the cloud: "This is my son!" And when the cloud clears, Moses and Elijah are gone. It's as if their baton has now been passed to Jesus.

All of this is to set up the second thing to notice here, which is the very next thing God says: "Listen to him." As usual, context is crucial. This Transfiguration event takes place immediately after Jesus has revealed to his disciples that he is the Messiah his people have been waiting for, the king God promised to send to restore the fortunes of God's people. But then almost in the next breath, he tells them that he must now go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. And then he tells his disciples that if they want to follow him, they need to take up their own crosses – face their own suffering and death. This is why the voice of God must now intervene in the proceedings. Because what Jesus has recently told them sounds like crazy talk; not the way to be a king, not the way to restore a kingdom, not the way to any kind of meaningful future for

anyone but the powers that be. “Listen to him!” says God from the cloud. Listen to what he has said up until now, and listen to what he will say next. And what he says is this: “Get up and do not be afraid.” He says this to the disciples who had just been scared half to death by God’s voice from the cloud, but who were also probably still disturbed by Jesus’ earlier words about going to Jerusalem and taking up their own crosses. They would much rather stay on top of this mountain with their teacher and his famous friends. That had been their plan before God’s voice interrupted them. But those friends are gone now. There’s only Jesus. “Get up and do not be afraid,” he is saying to them.

The final thing to notice here is what Jesus says next. He does not want them to tell anyone about what they have just experienced. Not yet. Not until he has been raised from the dead. There’s a lot packed into that simple statement. There’s confirmation that he meant what he said earlier. He really is going to his death. Then there’s also a hint that there’s some secret here that they’re not fully in on, that they won’t understand what this vision really means without knowing more than they do now. And finally, there’s that claim that Jesus has already made once, but that the disciples seem not to have noticed, or just couldn’t hear because of the upsetting things that came before. His death will not be the end of his story. The end of his story will be life. He will walk out of his tomb, freed from the bonds of death, and his kingdom will be established.

You can appreciate now why the revision of the lectionary half a century ago moved the church’s observance of the Transfiguration to the last Sunday before Lent. Just as Jesus was preparing his disciples for the difficult days again, so the church now prepares us to enter the season of penitence and contemplation focused on God’s love for us in Jesus’ death and resurrection. But this is not just about the church calendar. It’s really about what it means to be a follower Jesus in a world that remains steadfastly opposed to God’s mission of love, compassion, and mercy for all people. We can expect that mission to be met with contempt from some, and from others and attempt to coopt it for their own purpose. The latter will try to align Jesus with their own greed and idolatries, whether political, economic, or cultural. Even Jesus’ closest disciples will have their bad days and head down this path. Judas, of course and then Peter too. But not only them. Remember that episode where James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan village that wouldn’t welcome them? They remembered the story of Elijah doing the same to the priests of Baal, and they wanted in on that action.

The way of the cross that Jesus is preparing us to walk aims to undermine and defang all of our self-serving, self-destructive, and self-deluding attitudes, actions, and systems. Jesus will go through death to defeat the power of death. He will endure evil to neutralize evil. He will accept the consequences of our sinfulness to undo sin so that life in its fullness may abound.

There are dark days ahead, brothers and sisters, yes, in the ritual life of the church, but also in our daily life in the world that our ritual life is meant to prepare us for. There will be dark days ahead because life is like that. But right now, at this moment – if only for a moment – we linger in the light of Christ to remember his enduring promise that in him our future is indeed bright, whatever else may come in the meantime. May we cling to that promise in all the days still in front of us. May it be a light in our darkness and a lamp for our path. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.