

Sermon for Trinity Church

Transfiguration, 2019

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

I've been a collector of religious bumper stickers for years. Admittedly, I don't actually own them, but I do have them archived in my mind. Some of my favorites include "When you drive like I do, you better believe in God!" Or a Berkeley seminary favorite from many years ago, "Jesus is coming, and boy is he mad." A more recent favorite is, "Honk if you love Jesus, text if you want to see him." But my most favorite of all time is, "Jesus Saves, but Gretzky scores!" I think they're funny even if a bit misguided. The first bumper sticker I remember as an adult though was popular in Northern California many decades ago. It read simply, "I found it." I confess that the first few times I saw that sticker, I didn't know what the sticker meant. I found ice cream? My way home? But no, it really meant "I found Jesus." Here's the point: I'd like to think my confusion arose because I didn't know I had to find Jesus. I had always believed Jesus was looking for me.

You can see what I mean in the Gospel for today, the Transfiguration. As Gospel stories go, it's not one of the all-time favorites. If you want favorites you have to turn to the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son or the Wedding at Cana. Those parables speak to us in any language whether translated or not. A couple of years ago, Kathy and I went to church one Sunday morning in rural France with several friends. The Mass, singing and preaching were all in French which I do not speak. But the delivery of the preacher was so good and the story so familiar, we actually understood him. We knew the Prodigal Son had returned.

One challenge of the story of the Transfiguration is that the disciples' encounter with the transfigured Jesus is so enormous, so dramatic, so beyond their reckoning, that it stretches outside our expectations too. The Jesus of the parables speaks to God and Jesus' loving concern for us. Do we need to be more compassionate than we are? Then listen to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Do we need to celebrate God's enduring love, then listen to the Prodigal Son. Do you want to know about God and Jesus' superabundant, overflowing love then witness the hundreds of gallons of ritual water turned into wine in Cana. Now that's God, that's Jesus, caring and loving us beyond all expectations. Jesus being transfigured

however, turning bright as snow, change beyond imagining, undergoing metamorphosis, is much harder to grasp.

There's a reason for that. Much earlier in the Gospel, Jesus goes down to the river Jordan to meet his cousin, there to be baptized. Luke doesn't at first make much of this baptism; he's almost matter of fact in his report. Apparently, Jesus is but one of a crowd seeking baptism. But when Jesus is baptized, the heavens open and Luke reports the Spirit descended on Jesus "like a dove" and a voice said, not so very different from this morning's Gospel, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We need to stop and visualize this dramatic scene in our minds; the Spirit descends on Jesus and the voice of God speaks. Now, ask yourselves: was this voice for the benefit of Jesus, or for us? Was the vision of the Spirit for Jesus, and the voice so Jesus would know who he was, or was it for us?

We have a similar experience this morning. Jesus had just a few verses earlier told the disciples about his future, especially the cross and resurrection. They of course, having had no prior experience, don't really get what he means. Then, several of the disciples accompany Jesus up a mountain where God appears in a cloud (just as God did on Mount Sinai to Moses). Out of the cloud, the two great prophets of Israel, the aforesaid Moses, and the prophet Elijah appear in the presence of Jesus. It's at that point, once again we hear a voice from heaven say, "This is my son, my chosen; listen to him." This time we don't need to wonder who the vision or the voice is for, it's for us. Jesus, transfigured by God, knows who he is; now is the time for the disciples and for us, to know who Jesus is.

The identity of Jesus is not all we are meant to take away from these stories. There's another takeaway, just as important: God will come for us just as God came for Jesus. God will intervene in human history and God will care for us and love us. I don't believe we can summon up God's voice on demand; if we could, I think we would hear the thunder of God's voice pretty much all the time. No, this story of the Transfiguration, much like the story of the baptism of Jesus, anticipates the once and for all death and resurrection of Jesus. In just a few days, we begin the long journey of Lent to the cross and Easter resurrection. It's in remembering that journey year in and year out that we experience anew the God who intervened for us once and forever. That's one more message of the Transfiguration—God who loves us will come for us. We don't have to find God, God has already found us.

There's at least one more message that we can take away on this baptism Sunday. Remember the baptism of Jesus one more time. John came to cleanse the people, but the baptism of Jesus begins something new, something greater than

cleansing. John the Baptist talks of someone coming far more powerful than he is and that someone, following the Spirit and the voice, is plainly Jesus. Now, what's a bit hidden from us is that immediately following this baptism, Jesus begins his public ministry. The act of baptism may be cleansing of our past, if we have a past. But chiefly, baptism is a new beginning, a beginning that even God in Jesus shares with us. So, what does God call us to in baptism? To see who Jesus is and to begin a new life with God.

Here's the last takeaway—the baby getting baptized today is not in this baptism alone. God is with the baby. And God is with us. We, the church gathered, have a community responsibility to listen to God, to gather in support for the baptized in this listening, and to refresh our own beginning. This child is God's beloved child; listen to God. Amen.

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