

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 February 14, 2021, Transfiguration Sunday
 Mark 9:2-9
 “Who is On The Mountain?” by Rev. Sue Trigger

GOSPEL LESSONS

Mark 9:2-9

(CEB)

² 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, ³ and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. ⁴ Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ He said this because he didn’t know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One^[a] had risen from the dead.

We mark time in the Church by ascribing important meaning to festivals and seasons throughout the year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter. In our Awakening to Worship program we teach our young children about the church year each week. (*show video of Diane Schmidt*) The rhythm of the year is shaped by the story of God’s salvation in Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday that marks an important transition in Jesus’ ministry. From this Sunday forward, we remember this moment when Jesus set his sights on Jerusalem where he would die.

Transfiguration Sunday is a mountain top Sunday. A moment when Jesus’ identity was revealed to his disciples in a glorious bright light. Peter, James and John were amazed as they saw Jesus in the presence of two of the greatest prophets, Moses the law giver God spoke to face to face, and Elijah who met with God on the mountain and was taken up to heaven without facing death. This was a moment of shock and awe as Jesus stood before the disciples and revealed that

he was more than a teacher and miracle worker, more than a prophet. In that moment, the disciple's eyes were opened to one who was fully human and fully divine.

I wonder if it was Jesus' appearance that was changed, or was it possible that the disciple's eyes were opened to see Jesus as he truly was? That's a question I want to ask Jesus one day. But, whether his appearance changed or the disciples eyes were opened, this is a story about lives being transformed. It was a point of discovery for the disciples as they began to connect Jesus' identity to his ministry.

I want to share with you a writing about the transfiguration that was written by The Rev. Vernon Johns, the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He was a leader in the early days of the civil rights movement and his pastorate was succeeded by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As we celebrate Black History Month, I offer you his words from a sermon preached in 1925. ⁱ

“On the heights is the location for moral discovery. It is a slower process and requires stouter gear to do the mountain road than to run along the shining speedways of the valley. But woe to the world when there are no visitors on the heights!

It is good to be present when the ordinary is transformed; when the dull plain garments of a peasant becoming shining white, and the obscure “mountain place apart,” comes into the gaze of centuries. It is good to see the commonplace illumined and the glory of the common people revealed. On the Mount of Transfiguration, there is no representative of wealth, social rank, or official position. The place could boast in the way of population [of] only four poor men, members of a despised race, and of the remnant of a subjected and broken nation. But, it is here, instead of Jerusalem or Rome, that the voice of God is heard. It is here, instead of Mount Moriah, where the mighty temple stands, that the cloud of glory hovers. Out there, where a carpenter and three fishermen kept vigil with the promise of a new day, God is a living Reality and life is charged with meaning and radiance. Out there in a deserted place, the meek and the lowly are enabled.”

Johns described the transfiguration as a moment on the mountain with Jesus where the slow process of moral discovery began in the minds of three lowly fishermen. No one of wealth, social rank or official position was there. This moment of God's revelation didn't happen in Jerusalem or Rome, but with a small remnant of a subjected and broken nation. To the least in society, God gave the eyes to see the divine in glory.

Don't you wish we could stand on that mountain and see the glory of God? We attend conferences and events looking for an encounter with God. We come home and call them mountain top experiences. The Triennium Youth Conference has always been a mountain top experience for me. But, as Rev. Johns rightly said, "...the location for moral discovery is a slower process and requires stouter gear to do the mountain road.

I have experienced that slow journey this season of Epiphany. I have been climbing the mountain and sometimes the load has been heavy, but it has also been a time of deep revelation. Last Sunday we ended our adult study on the Matthew 25 invitation of the PCUSA. We focused on what it means to be a Matthew 25 congregation. We talked about building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. We had great conversations. At the same time, I attended an outstanding online conference of the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators that asked us to dig deeper into the issues of race and poverty. There were some important lessons that impacted me. 1. I have once again had to face that I really don't know what it means to be a person of color or poor. 2. I realized that I don't even know the questions to ask about the experience of people of color because I have lived my life benefiting from systems that disproportionately serve white people like me. I struggle to imagine exactly what people of color experience. 3. I recognized in a powerful way that learning the stories of others is a process, just as Rev. Johns said. The racism training I have experienced even as recently as 2015 is dated. Society, and even the vocabulary of racism, has changed and requires continual learning and listening. 4. Lastly, I've realized that in order to do the work that our denomination has invited us to do, I must do more than study about racism and poverty, but I must join the work of dismantling structures and systems that give advantages to white people and push down others.

Wrestling with these things is not easy. It is hard to see myself as part of a system that has oppressed others. I don't want to be that person. It's easy to feel defensive and say, but wait, I haven't had it easy either. I have my story of struggle and pain, too. But the fact remains that I will never walk into a department store and have a clerk follow me around, afraid that I might steal something. I will never walk down the street and have others cross the street, afraid that I might hurt them. I will never know what it is like to have people jeer at me and accuse me of causing the pandemic because of my Asian descent. I will never know the fear of being an asylum seeker, afraid that I will be swept up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement as I struggle through a long and complicated application process. As hard as I want to try, I can't. I will always have an advantage.

Here's what is hard for me. I have always thought I was pretty aware of racial issues. I grew up in Waterloo, Iowa where racial issues are huge. I went through school at a time when the city was committed to integrated schools. Some of my best friends were people of color and I saw some of their struggle. I thought I was pretty okay on issues of race. My moral discovery this season of Epiphany is that there is so much more I need to learn and more I need to do. Participating in the Matthew 25 initiative is an opportunity to do that.

When a group of well-meaning white people talk about racism, there is always the desire to do something, and one question that always comes up is how? What can we do? Tackling systemic poverty and structural racism are big issues. That is true, but there are things we can do, especially when we begin locally. We can do the work of contacting local officials and leaders of advocacy groups to find out needs we might be able to partner with. In our Sunday school class, we talked about partnering with other Matthew 25 churches and community groups working on transportation issues that affect the poor, people of color, college students, and the elderly. It's one step toward making change. It's one way of truly being an ally.

The challenge for us is that we have to come down from the mountain when we would rather stay. James, Peter and John wanted to stay on the mountain and enjoy standing in the presence of these great faith leaders. Peter wanted to build shrines for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, but Jesus said no. His work was to go down the mountain to teach and demonstrate the way of

God, and to prepare his followers to do the same. The fact that he chose a rag tag group of fisherman and outsiders gives us hope that we can do this work, too. Even when our words are uncertain and misguided, the light of Jesus' transfiguration gives us hope that we can overcome the brokenness of humanity.

John and Charles Wesley were brothers who became influential leaders of the evangelical revival of the Church of England in the 18th century. John Wesley is known as the father of the Methodist faith. Together, the brothers wrote the hymn, "Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies", number 662 in our hymnal. The hymn captures the focus of Jesus' transfiguration. "Dark and cheerless is the morn unaccompanied by thee; joyless is the day's return till thy mercy's beams I see." ⁱⁱ It is an invitation to us to climb the mountain. To stand in the radiance of God's presence, where we will witness the gloom of sin and grief pierced with the radiance of Christ's love, so that we can then come down the mountain and reflect Christ's radiance into a world that is burdened by the sin of oppression and injustice. The journey may be long, the work will be hard, but the hope of a world transformed is before us. Christ, who walks with us to the mountain top moments of revelation also walks with us when we come down the mountain and into the world. On this Transfiguration Sunday, may we go to the mountain and open our eyes and ears to see and hear what God intends for us and for all creation. May we come down the mountain and open our eyes and ears to see and hear one another, especially our siblings of color, the poor and the suffering. May we all have eyes to see the light of love that is shining.

ⁱ Vernon Johns, "Transfigured Moments" (ca.1925), in *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Frank A. Thomas and Martha Simmons (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 405.

ⁱⁱ Brooks, Gennifer Benjamin, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 1, Advent through Epiphany*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2020 p. 323.