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3 February 2008
Transfiguration Sunday
“Profound Encounter”
Matthew 17:1-9

The story of the transfiguration is such an unusual story, fraught with symbolism and meaning. It’s hard to know just where to begin. In our study of the Book of Revelation, we have been learning about the number six. All through the account of John’s revelation, we have been reading about seven this’s and seven that’s—seven churches, seven lamp stands, seven seals, seven horsemen, seven plagues, and so on. We know that seven is a number that was used in ancient cultures to denote perfection. When the number six is used, it means that something is not quite perfect, not complete.

Our story of the transfiguration this morning begins with the phrase, “After six days…” We’re not told six days after what. We can look back and find several things that Jesus was doing prior to this story, but none of them are placed in a temporal location. It would seem that Matthew is pointing us to the next thing - the seventh day, the day of completion. Following this event, Jesus will lead his followers to the new day. We celebrate that new day, the seventh day, each Sunday, each Lord’s Day.

But in our study of the Revelation, we are reminded that before the seventh thing happens, there is a pause, almost like drawing our breaths in anticipation of the next thing, to rest up before the final lap. It’s interesting to note that this day, the last Sunday of Ordinary Time after the Epiphany and before Lent, is halfway between Christmas (a mountaintop experience), and Easter (*the* mountaintop experience). After the birth of Jesus, we move immediately to the baptism of Jesus when, you might recall, a dove descended from heaven and a voice declared that Jesus is God’s son, the beloved. Jesus is commissioned for ministry at his baptism and immediately goes from that mountaintop experience to the wilderness where he pauses for 40 days and nights, and prepares to meet temptation and his return to work.

Mountains seem to be an important symbol for Matthew and other biblical writers. They are places where a revelation is made, where the disciples learn who Jesus is, where we learn who Jesus is. We might also recall that Moses too, went up a mountain, into a cloud where he paused for six days. On the seventh day, God called to Moses from the cloud, met Moses in the cloud and then sent him back to the people as a bearer of the divine revelation. He carries the tablets back down the mountain to the tent of meeting and a pillar of cloud rested on the tent. It was there that God spoke to Moses.

Elijah too, met God on the mountain and told God that he alone had remained faithful. We learn that this is a false perception, but Matthew takes up this theme. It is on this mountain that we learn who really does stand alone. Jesus shone like the sun before them and then Moses and Elijah show up for a little chat on the mountain. Bless his heart, Peter got excited and wanted to build some tents for the three where a pillar of cloud could rest. But God begins to speak to everyone there, just as he did at Jesus’ baptism, then a bright cloud covered them, just like on Mt. Sinai. God revealed to them who Jesus is, who really stands alone, and just to prove it, Moses and Elijah just disappeared.

And of course, when it’s all over, the disciples are found face down on the ground, shaking in fear. Jesus casually walks over as though nothing had just happened and touches them. He tells them to get up and don’t be afraid. Oh sure! Easy for him to say. And as they walk down the mountain from this incredible experience, they’re told to keep quiet until after the seventh day, the new day, the Lord’s Day of resurrection.

So here is the pause after the sixth day, as we await the seventh, completed thing. We pause on the mountain, we hear God reveal to the disciples who Jesus is, they finally realize that all those things they’d learned from

early days are once again coming to pass, but this time, they will be fulfilled in Jesus, God's son. It is on this mountain that Jesus re-affirms his baptismal identity prepares for the seventh thing, the encounter in Jerusalem. As just as a side note, it is interesting that Matthew ends his gospel on another mountain where the risen Jesus commissions his disciples to teach and baptize.

So just before Lent begins, we pause here at this mid-point, preparing to journey with Jesus to the events of Holy Week. We pause to reaffirm our baptismal identity as children of God, so that we might be empowered to walk through the events of Holy Week in order to claim the promise of the resurrection. These sixth days enable us to look ahead to what lies before us. They enable us to see who God is, who Jesus is as the human face of God, and to reaffirm our identity as followers of this divine revelation. They remind us that we are followers of the Christ, that we too, walk difficult journeys, but that we too, are called to serve the Christ.

I'm struck by a painting done by the Italian master, Raphael. The Transfiguration was his last work, and depicts the transfigured Jesus, in the top half of the painting, floating in front of the glowing clouds, flanked on either side by Moses and Elijah. In the lower half of the painting, we see a scene which actually follows Matthew's account of the transfiguration. The nine remaining disciples are at the foot of the mountain, involved in a mess as a couple brings their demon-possessed boy to them to be healed. We see darkly shadowed images in contrast to those on the mountain, confused and dismayed, unable to cast out this demon. In the scripture, we learn that Jesus came to the crowd, was confronted by the father, and healed the boy. He rebuked the disciples for having no faith, and yet these are the ones whom he had sent out to heal and cure and to spread the gospel message, recorded just a few chapters earlier.

Perhaps the disciples, like many of us, do not fully realize what Jesus empowered them to do. Perhaps even those on the mountain with Jesus, like many of us, do not even fully realize who Jesus is. Jesus took the three up the mountain so that they might be privy to his identity when it was revealed. And their response to the divine encounter was to offer to build houses to contain God. Jesus came down the mountain after being bolstered for the next things, and healed the boy in the full view of all around him. The disciples' response to the troubles of the people was to panic and despair, to point to the mountain where Jesus had gone, hoping he would get back soon since they seemed to be in trouble here.

But it wasn't just Jesus who had been changed. Peter followed close to Jesus after this encounter with the divine. He tried to learn everything he could. Oh, he still had his weak moments, but he had been changed, and just as Jesus had said, upon him the church was built. It wasn't a tent or a booth or any kind of altar or church building that he constructed to try to contain God. He built disciples who also shared the good news with others, and soon, the news of Jesus Christ spread to all the lands and the world was changed.

Funny thing is, it seems that no one can have an encounter with God on a mountain and not be changed. And we have encounters with the divine—as Columbia Seminary professor Anna Carter Florence puts it, “God sprints into view [and] flashes across our path—which, incidentally, happens *every day*...” But the interesting thing is the way we are changed, the way we respond to those encounters. So what happens when we encounter the divine? What do we do when we encounter something that is bigger than we are, something beyond our imagination? How do we make sense of something which is beyond human logic?

Some of us get busy constructing something to contain God. We have been to the mountaintop and we want to hang on to that forever. We live in the land of the yesterdays and do-ya-remember's. We long to go back, but that moment is gone and we are left with nothing but faded photographs and sweet memories.

Some of us keep quiet about it for fear of being labeled as crazy or fanatic—one of *those* Christians. And we bottle it up inside and we never share it with anyone. *No one else* needs to know about it! It was a private experience, anyway. No one will ever know the transformative power of God in our lives because we are afraid.

Some of us feel the need to talk all about it. We talk and talk and talk until we begin to notice that folks are beginning to avoid us. But why wouldn't everyone want to know about our personal, incredible experiences? Short of beating one another up, we can fail to convey the true meaning of the gospel. We focus too much on our own personal experience and we become a champion of ourselves rather than an instrument of the gospel.

So what's a good disciple to do when we encounter the divine? Perhaps we can learn a few things from today's incredible story.

We recall that Peter was at first pretty excited. I can imagine any of us would be pretty excited too, if we had an encounter with God. And he reacted in the only way he knew – he recalled the experiences of his ancestors and tried to follow suit by providing a place to meet God. But then he came to his senses, or perhaps it was the voice from heaven, but in fear and awe, he fell to the ground. He realized his place when in the presence of holiness. As they came back to the “real world” as it were, they kept their mouths closed about it, as Jesus told them, until the time was right. There was a pause in the action as Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem and made his preparations for the seventh day.

When the word began to get out that Jesus had been raised on that first Easter morning, the seventh day, it all began to make sense. And they started to talk. And they shared the good news with everyone who had also encountered the Christ. And the word got around, and they kept telling those who would listen, and just as Jesus had instructed them, they shook the dust from their sandals in those places where people refused to hear. They were commissioned by the risen Christ to their ministry of spreading the gospel to all the nations, and teaching new Christians to obey Christ's teaching.

A good disciple follows and stays close to the teacher. A good disciple keeps quiet and watches for God to sprint into view or flash across our path, and he listens for God's voice. A good disciple remembers her place in relation to the Creator and worships in fear and in awe. He does not try to capture God or contain God in man-made structures, but waits and listens for the leading of Christ. A good disciple follows Christ from the mountain into the valley and ministers in faith to those who are there, pondering the experiences and sharing the good news with others.

As we draw this season of the church year to a close, I would like to invite you to ponder the experiences you have had with the risen Christ. Where have you heard God's voice? Who has represented the holy to you? How have you borne the divine to others?

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, a time when we begin the descent from the mountain with Christ and begin the journey to Holy Week and to the cross. Because we have been to the mountain, we have been changed, transformed from ordinary people into disciples – disciples who stick close, keep quiet and watchful, listening for God's voice, for Christ's leading, calling us to spread the gospel, to minister to those in need, to let go of the structures and idols and comforts of the past so that we can march courageously with Christ through the waters of baptism, all the way to the cross, and into the bright cloud of tomorrow as new people, God's people.

So join me on this sixth day as we pause and draw our breath in anticipation of these next things.