

Transfiguration, 2017, Matthew-- Get Up, Don't Fear

A week ago yesterday Phil and I went up to Gooseberry Falls with Phil's sister and her husband, who were visiting from Sparta, WI. Like you, probably, I have seen Gooseberry Falls any number of times and under varying kinds of external circumstances. I have marveled at the Falls as being frozen in time and still, while shivering in my winter jacket. I have gazed awestruck at them after a summer rainstorm, as unimaginable torrents of water crash down. I have also seen them in the middle of dry times, a rather humble fall of water with lots of the surrounding rocks visible and accessible. But, I have never seen them like I saw them last Saturday. It was 56 degrees with bright sunshine; we were warm wearing our hoodies in the middle of February! And yet the area below and around the Falls was still snow covered and frozen for the most part. It was surprisingly crowded, we had to drive around several times to find a parking place. Which meant that we and most of Minnesota, seemingly, were out standing on the frozen river, just feet away from the Falls themselves on the ice pack, in spite of numerous warning signs telling us not to do so, of course. The Falls themselves were simply amazing; a combination of frozen ice sculpture and rushing water, and I had never seen them like that before. Nor do I expect to again. It was a transitory experience and we were fortunate to be there on that particular day. Not much time before that, I'm sure they were entirely frozen, and not much time after that, they likely were entirely liquid. And the likelihood of another day of 56 degrees and sunshine combined with ice and snow covered river access to such a close up vision is extremely slim. It *was* a transfiguration; the area is always awesome, but on that particular afternoon it was pure magic. It was one of those "My God, how great thou art" moments, and our souls were most certainly refreshed and restored by the experience.

Although we were not strictly on top of a mountain, it could still be classified as a mountain top experience.

That is the kind of experience we have literally before us in today's Gospel lesson. The three disciples, Peter, James, and John, climb a mountain with Jesus and experience something awe inspiring, unique, *and* transitory; this is a holy experience they will always remember, but it wasn't a lasting set of circumstances, any more than was our Gooseberry Falls experience. These three were blest to be present and have a "My God, how great thou art" moment, but it wouldn't last. The significance of the moment, though, would almost *certainly* shape them for the rest of their lives. So, let's examine this moment more closely.

We read that Jesus took these three with him up the mountain path; this is a hiking expedition led and initiated by Jesus. There is a long Biblical tradition for holy things happening on top of mountains; our Old Testament lesson is such an instance, where Moses meets up with God on top of Mount Sinai and experiences God's glory. *This* mountain top in Matthew will also be a place where God's glory is revealed. Because once the four have reached the top, strange and holy things start to happen. Jesus is transfigured with light as bright as sunshine, and God speaks from a cloud after Moses and Elijah have appeared.

Let's look briefly at each of these phenomena. We know about clouds and about light, don't we? The clouds and sunlight at sunrise and sunset have produced some pretty amazing colors as of late, haven't they? And this Biblical cloud is described as a "bright cloud", which seems an interesting and almost contradictory description, but obviously made an impression.

And what about the light? We are told, "he was transfigured before them, and his face

shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” It sounds as though the light is nearly blinding in its intensity.

And what of the vision? The vision of Moses and Elijah would seem to represent how Jesus is fulfilling the law, symbolized by Moses, and the prophets, symbolized by Elijah. If we stop to think about it, we might wonder—how did the disciples know it was Moses and Elijah before them? It’s not like they had pictures preserved from the past to identify them by. Were they wearing those stick-on name tags? “Hello, my name is Moses. Hello, my name is Elijah”. We don’t know. Perhaps Moses held the tablets of the 10 commandments in the vision; perhaps Elijah was seen with his fiery chariot. At any rate, somehow the disciples knew who they were, and they likely would have understood that their presence connected the long tradition of the Old Testament law and prophecy with Jesus in their midst in the current moment.

And it’s interesting that there is mention specifically of Christ’s clothes becoming dazzling white. We don’t usually get those kinds of details in our gospel accounts. As it happens, there are three other times in the Gospel where cloth is mentioned with such specificity in relation to Jesus. Do you know where they are? One is at his birth, where it is specified to the shepherds that they will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, the ancient equivalent of a receiving blanket. And again at his death, we learn that his cloak was of too fine a quality to be divided up among the Roman guards, but rather that they rolled the dice for who would win it as one whole piece. And at the resurrection, we are told of the burial cloths in which Jesus was wrapped, and of how they were so meticulously and mysteriously folded in a pile when the disciples discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning. So, this little detail about clothing ties together this experience on the mountaintop with Christ’s birth and death and resurrection. It reminds us of how God’s intent for Christ was woven throughout the fabric of his life, and it

makes sense out of the path Christ took and would take in his life journey. It reminds us that God had a plan and was at work in the events of Christ's life. As He is in ours, which is reassuring, when we sometimes have trouble following the story line.

There are so many places we might focus on in this lesson, as we have an abundance of rich detail, more than we typically get in Scriptural texts. But, I'd like to focus on what the cloud said; or rather, what the voice of God, as experienced in the cloud, had to say. "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to Him." Alert worshippers should recognize the first portion of these words: "This is my Son, the beloved." We heard them earlier in this season of Epiphany, the middle of January, actually, when we read about which experience in the life of Jesus? Yes, his baptism. Very good! Recall that when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and a voice from the heavens declared, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with Him I am well pleased." In fact, these two experiences, Christ's baptism and now his transfiguration, bookend the season of Epiphany which we are concluding today. This has been a season of revelations about who Jesus is: in moments of glory like his baptism or this transfiguration, or in the content of his teaching, as we have explored the Sermon on the Mount this past month. The season began and ended with the revelation of Who Jesus was; the Son, the Beloved, and with God's delight in Christ. It's not clear in the account of the Baptism if others heard the voice, or just Christ---and if others did, we don't anything about their reaction. But in this instance, on this mountaintop, it is all about the disciples hearing the voice and about their reaction. Their reaction, of course, is terror. The disciples were already having a pretty interesting time up there on the mountain, weren't they? Even before the cloud started talking? They saw Jesus transfigured, they saw light, and then the vision of Elijah and Moses—all of which probably shook them up a wee bit. Peter, true to form,

starts talking, even those he's too overwhelmed to make much sense; "Lord, it's a good thing we're here, because we can set up little shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"---as if Jesus had brought them along to be his housing providers and activity schedulers. Fortunately, before Peter can start planning out wallpaper patterns or menus for meals, the bright cloud overshadows them and the voice of God is heard. This voice moves the disciples from merely stunned and confused to downright terrified. They literally collapse to the ground, overcome by fear. Which may be a reminder to us that experiencing the Holy, having the rare kind of transcendent experience may not be so much jolly fun as it is humbling, confusing, and frightening. There's nothing tame or cute about God; and the disciples are quite reasonably frightened out of their wits. The voice began with the same words as at the baptism of Christ, but it added on a crucial phrase that was not spoken at the Jordan River: "listen to him". And that difference is significant. God invites Jesus' followers to listen to Jesus, who as we noted earlier this month, is especially held up as teacher in the Gospel of Matthew. God wants us to listen to Jesus, to pay attention to His words and voice. And I have to wonder---is that a hard thing for us to do at times, maybe especially times like these right now?

Because in my mind, there is a lot of distracting background noise happening right now. I had a friend, who valued her regular prayer times, who took a vacation at a resort in Mexico. When I asked her about it, she said they had a room that overlooked the pool and the courtyard, and there was constant loud activity there. "It was so noisy", she told me, "that I couldn't hear the Lord." I fear that is most certainly true of our times in general right now. It's so noisy; can we hear the Lord? There's the noise of political discontent, the noise of angry and raised voices from all across the spectrum, the noise of evolving technologies and changing economic realities and a whole world clamoring with woe. Our anxieties call out to us, the needs of our family and

friends ring in our ears, our own insecurities or unresolved issues are noisily in our face. Can we hear the Lord? Can we listen to Jesus? God commands us to do so. And it will likely require an act of intentionality on our part; finding that quiet space, in church, at home, along the Lake, where ever it may be; and making a point of prayer, of meditation, of wonder, of awareness of the Lord. Can we hear the Lord?

I think we long to do so, and with good reason in a clamorous and discordant world. Because listen to the very first words Jesus says after God instructs the disciples to listen to him. They are lying in a terrified heap on the ground. We read first of all of a wonderfully personal detail: “Jesus came and touched them”. Jesus touched them! What kind of a touch, we might wonder? A handclasp? A pat on the shoulder? A reassuring rub on the back? But he touched them! He didn’t stand at a distance. He didn’t tell them to stop their sniveling and act like adults. He came to them and he touched them. That’s the kind of Lord that we have. And then he spoke, saying: “Get up and do not be afraid.” Again, he doesn’t judge them, he doesn’t abandon them, give up on them and say, “fine, just lie there if you like”, he doesn’t do anything like that at all. Instead he invites them: “Get up.” And he reassures and encourages them, “Do not be afraid.”

Isn’t this exactly what most of us need to hear? Don’t we long to feel the touch of Jesus? Don’t we need his bracing words: “Get up. You can do this.” And don’t we need his reassurance of presence? “Do not be afraid.” Whether we are literally lying on our beds, weighed down with grief or depression; or figuratively at our wits ends, ready to just lie down and give up, this is what Jesus says to *us*: “Get up. Don’t be afraid.” Our Lord is with us, not to judge us or to give up on us, but to help us to our feet and reassure us of his presence and guidance. We don’t need to be afraid, because just as Jesus walks back down the mountain with

his disciples, he walks beside us. And not only beside us; *before* us, to guide us. *Behind* us, to protect us. God has got our backs. And *alongside* us, to encourage us. We experience and receive our Lord's companionship and strength through any number of means, including several we experience and receive this very morning during this very hour of worship: the holy meal we share with Christ and with each other; the fellowship and support we find in our fellowship together; the richness of God's word, heard in Scripture and sung in hymns. And those moments of transcendence or transfiguration that God provides us every so often, those Gooseberry Falls moments, those "My God, how great thou art" moments. They may be fleeting, but they leave a mark. In all these ways and more, we can listen to our Lord. And we can hear him say to us; "Get up. Do not be afraid." Amen.