

Into the Light

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

February 11, 2018

Transfiguration – Year B

Mark 9:2-9



I always think of two things on Transfiguration Sunday, a tree and a cloud.

The tree had bright yellow leaves, which always puts me in mind of autumn camping trips with my daughter and our mutual love of the yellow leaves. This tree was unusual. I was in the mountains of western North Carolina in late November alone in a house that looked out over the mountain range. Not a tree in sight at that time of year had any leaves; a few had brown ones barely hanging on. But every morning, I would go out on the porch to watch the sun make its way up over the ridge. Sunrises are late in the mountains. The sun takes longer to peek over the ridge. But when it did, its light would find that one tree, stubbornly hanging on to its brilliance. When the sun hit it, the tree seemed to catch fire. I sat and watched in awe, transfixed by this transfigured tree, its leaves beautiful in their dying.

The other thing I think about on this Sunday is driving up twin peaks in San Francisco, getting out of the car at an observation deck, looking out over the city in the late afternoon when the fog came over the peaks. The sun darkened and the wind blew at least sixty miles an hour. I could barely stand up as we were enveloped in the cloud. People gasped and shrieked in surprise and sudden fear. I remember thinking how I had observed the “fog rolling in,” – what my brother calls “God’s air conditioner” in San Francisco, over these very peaks, and from down below it all looks rather peaceful. The clouds seem to gently roll in. But here, on the mountain, within the rolling clouds – not so much.

I think about both these experiences – a yellow tree out of place among bare limbs lit by the sun and the violent cloud enveloping us on the mountain – on this Sunday because I get much the same feeling hearing this strange story as I did on those days.

The story is simply told. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him up on a high mountain. Mark is careful to help us know it is an isolated place. They are very much alone for this experience. What they see is Jesus in an altered state. His clothing shines like the sun. Mark, reaching for metaphors, says they are brighter than any bleach could

make them. Elijah and Moses are with him. Peter, always the one to speak before thinking about what he is going to say, proclaims it is good for them to be there and stammers out something about building booths for the three of them. This prompts Mark, the narrator, to say something that provides the first clue to the mystery of this text:

“Peter didn’t know what to say, for they were terrified.” Terrified.

When you are afraid, it is tempting to try and assert control over the situation. When you’re afraid, you have ideas like building booths on the mountain, capturing the light, bringing this experience into conformity with your expectations. Peter was afraid. So, he brings up building something, giving this experience a name, anything to keep from having to feel this terror.

The Greek word used here for “terrified” is “ekphobos.” You probably heard that root word for “phobia.” This word is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Hebrews 12:21. “Indeed, so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’” That itself is a quote from Deuteronomy 9:19, and is the only time the word is used in the Old Testament.

It is this terror that unites the figures who commune on this mountain with Jesus.

Moses, you recall, went up on Mt. Sinai, and there he saw God face to face. God spoke the words of the law to Moses on that mountain according to the tradition, and when Moses came down, each time he came down, his face was glowing such that the people were terrified and begged him to cover his face. Even the reflected glory of God was too much.

And you remember the story of Elijah. The prophet had angered Jezebel, and she in rage had promised to kill him herself. He flees in fear to Mt. Horeb, and cowers in a cave. While in the cave he hears a mighty wind, breaking rocks, but God is not in the wind. He hears an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. And then he hears a sound of sheer silence. Don’t look at me that way, that’s what the text says. I don’t know any better than you what it means to hear silence. But hear it he does, and he wraps himself up in his mantle and walks outside the cave trembling before the God who speaks in that silence.

Both are there, with Jesus and the trembling, terrified disciples. The disciples now take their place on the mountain. This is their Sinai. This is their Horeb. This is the place where God draws near.

This is the place to listen.

The only voice that speaks in this story is the same one that spoke on Sinai and Horeb. “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!” This is the counter to Peter’s fearful attempts to control. Listen.

In that place of fear – listen.

Moses listens as God tells him that he must walk with this people through the pain and uncertainty of the wilderness. And Moses will walk with them for forty years, bearing their pain, guiding them to the threshold of the promised land.

Elijah listens to the voice of God out of the silence, telling him that he is far from alone, that he should come out of the cave and move toward the confrontation with Jezebel, to the place of danger.

And Jesus tells Peter, James, and John that they are to keep quiet about what they have seen on the mountain until after he has risen from the dead. The path they must follow from this place of transfiguration and light leads not to glory, but to the cross.

And here we are, at the foothills of the season of Lent, which begins in just a few days. This Sunday we, too, are witnesses to Jesus enveloped in light. We, too, are called to listen to him, to walk down the mountain with him toward the cross. We, too, are invited to enter the place of vulnerability and fear, to tread the path of Moses and Elijah and Jesus.

And I’m glad this text comes to us before Lent. Because I need Lent to make sense of it. I need a good, long while. I need weeks of reflection. I need the journey to the cross, because to just rush down the mountain talking of a glowing Jesus and a vision of Moses and Elijah without the cross would be easily misunderstood. Jesus tells them to stay quiet. He seems to know. As Fred Craddock says, “You can just come down the mountain and say, ‘Guess what we saw today.’” It’s too soon.

I’m glad Jesus says, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll lead you into Lent, into Holy Week, to Good Friday and Easter morning. And I think then you will find your tongue and be able to tell of what you’ve seen and heard.”

John Calvin said God’s revelation is veiled, like Moses’s face, and it comes to us according to our capacity to receive it, so it is veiled in flesh and human words and bread and wine so we could handle it. Sometimes you catch glimpses of it in blazing yellow

trees, sometimes in fearful enveloping clouds, sometimes in a vision of our Lord wrapped in light. It can all seem too much, really, and we need time – time to work through our fear, time to walk with Jesus, time to listen, time to break bread and drink from the cup.

Lent is that time. It invites us to walk down the mountain, and listen to the one whose words are life itself.

The invitation to you, to me, this Transfiguration Day, is to see, along with the disciples, Jesus, now alone, turned toward Jerusalem, toward the cross, walking alongside us, and speaking. The path lies before us. We are not alone. Listen. Listen.

Amen.