

Matthew 17:1-9
Last Sunday After the Epiphany
St Mark – February 23, 2020
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Do Not Be Afraid

There is tremendous depth in our gospel reading this morning. To wade through all of the symbolism, references to Old Testament Scriptures, and deep mystery we need a well-studied Biblical scholar to help us... sadly we have me instead.

Reading commentaries on this passage did help me with some of the questions that immediately come to mind as I ponder this story of Jesus' transfiguration.

Why six days?

Why three Apostles? and why these three?

Why Elijah and Moses?

How did Peter recognize Elijah and Moses?

A great deal is written about each of these questions and far more, but there is another message here, a message that is simple and lovely. Jesus touches the three witnesses he has chosen and tells them to not be afraid.

On this last Sunday after the Epiphany our Gospel reading tells the story of the Transfiguration, a marked change of appearance into a more beautiful and spiritual state, this transfiguration of Jesus.

On the Epiphany Jesus is revealed by the Wise Men to be the Messiah, the Son of God. He is an infant full of promise, we are told that after being revealed "he continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom: and the grace of God was upon Him."

Jesus became strong and wise and on this, the last Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday before we begin the season of Lent, we remember the moment in Jesus' life when there can be little doubt that Jesus knows it all.

He knows who he is, fully. He hears God say, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased..." Jesus heard this immediately after he was baptized too,

but this time God goes on to say, “listen to him”. Jesus has come into his own and he knows it.

In the company of Moses, who represents all the law, and Elijah who represents all the prophets – Moses and Elijah who are two of the most important Old Testament figures – in their company God not only claims Jesus, God proclaims the authority of Jesus.

Peter and the two sons of Zebedee (James and John) were chosen by Jesus to witness this miraculous moment. Jesus chose these three, to the exclusion of the rest of the Apostles, and he did this at other times too.

In Luke’s Gospel we learn of the illness and death of Jairus’s daughter. Jairus was an official in the synagogue and his only daughter was ill to the point of death. Jairus falls at Jesus’ feet and pleads with him to save her.

In Luke, chapter 8, verse 51 we read, “When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John, and James, and the child’s father and mother.”

It was only these three Apostles who witnessed the child rising from the sick bed, which had, only moments before, become her deathbed. It was these three that were called by Jesus to witness this most startling miracle.

In Matthew’s Gospel we read about Jesus calling his disciples to Gethsemane and telling them to sit while he goes off a short distance and prays. In verse 37 of chapter 26 we read:

“He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee [that would have been James and John], and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death: remain here, and stay awake with me.” It was these three, Peter, James, and John that Jesus calls to bare witness to Jesus’ last hours of freedom.

Some think that Jesus chose these three to witness his transfiguration because they were the strongest in their faith, others believe it was because they were the weakest.

They were definitely special and they were most definitely human, it is Peter after all who denied Jesus just as Jesus had told him he would do and it is Peter of whom Jesus says, “you are the rock on which I will build my church”.

It is Peter who gives hope to all of we completely human beings, that for all our failings, Jesus loves us and calls us to be his own.

When Peter, James, and John heard God, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. Jesus touched them and alleviated their fear.

From time to time I’ve envied those who lived along side Jesus, those who knew him in his human form, but when I put myself in their place, when I imagine myself in that time, I begin to feel the confusion, the doubt, and the fear right along side the wonder and joy that must have been there too. What a treasure to have touched his hand and to hear his voice, what must that have been like to take in?

In the midst of talking with Moses and Elijah, as Jesus hears His Father claim him and proclaim His place in the Trinity, Jesus reaches out his hand in love. Comforting, strengthening, caring for Peter, James, and John in their need. Thinking not of himself and all that this moment means to and for Him, but caring for the frailty of humanity, the humanity he has come to save.

Jesus tells them they have nothing to fear.

“Don’t be afraid” appears frequently throughout the testaments, both old and new. We all know that fear is a common human experience. Fear can be paralyzing and all consuming. Fear often robs us of wonder. It can rob us of fully experiencing life, the life that God has given to each of us. Scripture includes many assurances that God’s people have nothing to fear from God or man.

Fear takes many forms; some are of things that will most assuredly occur, some are highly unlikely.

Many people fear the death of life, as we know it on Earth. Death will most probably occur for us all. Yet that fear, that fear of death robs us of the wonder of moving from this life to the next.

It was our 32nd president who told us that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself and it seems that he had it right. Fear is not helpful. Caution and awareness, yes, but fear goes too far. We are not called to be a fearful people.

Our gospel today describes Jesus in a way that I've always seen him in my mind's eye. I've come to expect that light emanates from Jesus, that his face shines like the sun, that his clothes are dazzling white.

Unlike Peter, James, and John at the time we are reading about today, I know that Jesus is the Son of God, one with God, that Jesus resurrected, that although Jesus was murdered Jesus LIVES and is with us still. For Peter, James, and John the story is unfolding.

At this moment, this moment of transfiguration, this moment when Jesus has fully come into the God-self he is, that he has been since the "beginning", at this moment when he talks with Moses and Elijah and stands in the light of God his father, when he stands as God, as the Son, when he stand consumed by Love we too could be overcome with awestruck fear, but we too are comforted by Jesus' assurance that fear is not necessary when the Love of God surrounds us.

His Love is focused on us... "Do not be afraid."