

The Sunday Next Before Lent
February 26, 2017, Year A
St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1.16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

“[Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God,] Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shown like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.”

The transfiguration is one of the many miraculous events that showed those who were with Jesus that he was more than just a regular person with an interesting story to tell. He healed people, turned water into wine, and multiplied the loaves and fishes; he even walked on water and calmed the stormy sea. He seemed to know the deepest secrets of people like the Samaritan woman at the well and Zacchaeus the tax collector, and he raised Lazarus and Jairus' daughter from the dead.

But the transfiguration stands apart in a class of its own because here we see no miracle in the sense of something Jesus did. Instead, through the eyes of the three disciples, we see Jesus for who he is. He stands before them as God himself, in unearthly form. “He was transfigured before them, and his face shown like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” is the best Peter, James and John could come up with to describe what they saw.

Jesus took them up the mountain with him because he wanted them to learn more about him so they could teach others. He is preparing them for future ministry. Six days earlier, Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was, and Peter had said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The Jews had been waiting for a Messiah for a long time, someone who would free them from Roman rule, but even before Rome came, they were looking for a Messiah who would once again make things right, perhaps restore the Davidic line of kings on the throne of Israel, perhaps reunite the divided kingdom and restore the greatness that Israel had once enjoyed long ago. The prophets had been predicting a Messiah for centuries, and there were many different interpretations about what kind of Messiah God would send and what he would do.

Peter declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, but he probably didn't know what he really meant by his declaration any more than anyone else did. Peter probably came to his conclusion because of the teachings he had heard and the miracles, signs and wonders he saw that seemed to follow Jesus everywhere. The crowds came out to hear the Master, and Jesus was well received in many places. Perhaps this was the man who could set things right and restore Israel somehow. He certainly had a lot of things going for him.

But Jesus knew what was in their hearts. They were looking for a new king, a warrior perhaps, someone who could lead them into better times from an earthly and human point of view. And while the people seemed to hear and understand that part of the message, the most important part was yet to come – that Jesus was not just a son of God like the Jehovah's Witnesses claim, in the sense that we are all sons and daughters of God – but that he was and is the Son of God, God himself.

Peter, James and John and the other disciples still had a lot to learn about this Jesus they were following, even as they began to comprehend the possibility that he could be the Messiah they had waited for for so long. Jesus took the three disciples up the mountain to show them without room for doubt who he really is. Before their eyes, he was transformed into his godly persona.

And to show them that what he was teaching them was to be built on foundations they already understood, he had Moses and Elijah appear with him. Moses represents the law which the Jews understood to be the very words of God given to them through Moses for how they were to order their lives in the way God intended for them to live. Elijah represents the prophets, those men and women of God who, over the centuries, had spoken to the people in behalf of God to admonish them when they went astray, to teach them how they should live, and to foretell of great things to come, both good and bad.

So Peter, James and John see Jesus standing in the middle in the place of honor with the law on one hand and the prophets on the other, his face shining like the sun and his clothes white as light, so bright they could hardly look at him. And then to make sure they get the message, the Word tells us that “a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.’”

Now Peter was probably scared out of his wits, and the others were probably just as bad off. When he sees Jesus looking totally different and standing with Moses and Elijah, Peter comes up with this amazing idea that the three disciples should build shelters for Jesus and his companions, perhaps to shield them from the sun or something. But, you know, this verse is so important for us to understand, because when we encounter the living God, the only sensible thing to do is to stop and listen. We have nothing to offer but our worship – which is, of course, what happens next. The Father speaks from out of the cloud, and we find our three friends on their faces in fear and awe.

Jesus rescues them, just as he had pulled Peter out of the water when he stepped out of the boat to meet Jesus and started to sink when he became distracted by the wind. “Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear.’”

There is no need of further explanation. They saw and experienced Jesus in a way that made it clear there was more to this Messiah stuff than just getting rid of the Romans. But what is that? And how would they be able to understand more?

The final verse connects this passage with the rest of the gospel message. “Jesus commanded them, ‘Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead.’” Why tell no one? Jesus said this to many people he encountered, and the reason is that they could not comprehend how all this would fit together until they had experienced the resurrection. Jesus wanted them, and us, to see the whole picture – the Messiah, the Christ, came to save our souls, not just to free the Jews from the Romans.

The transfiguration is an eyewitness account of the glory and splendor of Jesus Christ as the Son of the living God. After the resurrection, Peter, James and John shared their experience with the others. Matthew, Mark and Luke all include the account in their gospels. But John, one of the eyewitnesses, recalls the event this way: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

“We have seen his glory,” Jesus, fully the Son of God and the Son of man, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

And now unto you, O Lord, be ascribed all might, majesty, power and dominion. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.