

Sermon for Sunday, Feb. 23, 2020  
The Last Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A  
Sermon Text(s): Matthew 17:1-9  
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“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”  
(Matthew 17:5)

Peter, James, and John hear the voice of God speak these words about Jesus as they are gathered on the mountain in today’s Gospel reading.

We heard these exact same words just a few weeks ago, on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, when we heard the story of Jesus’s baptism. After John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended from heaven in the form of a dove and came to rest on Jesus’s head, and a voice from heaven said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17)

The season after the Epiphany is bookended by this phrase – “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The season starts and ends with these two moments where God declares Jesus to be his beloved Son and commands those around him to take notice.

These revelations from God take place at the beginning of the two significant phases of Jesus’s life. Jesus’s baptism occurs at the start of his public teaching ministry, and the Transfiguration occurs at the start of his passion, his journey to the cross. God tells us to “look, listen up, take notice!” – as Jesus begins to show us how to live and as he begins to show us how to die.

After Jesus’s baptism, he spent three years traveling and teaching throughout Galilee. In those three years, he taught us how to live. He taught us that the greatest commandment was to love God and love neighbor, and here at St. John’s we’ve made that our mission statement – to love God and love neighbor – in the way that Jesus taught us: welcoming all, serving humbly, teaching compassion, and making no peace with injustice.

Jesus taught us that God's grace and mercy extends not just to those we know and like, but also to those we don't know and those we don't like. He told us stories that remind us that just when we think we've figured out who's in and who's out, who's "righteous" and who's "wicked," God will come along and burst our bubble of certitude, breaking down stereotypes and drawing the circle ever wider, including the last people we'd have ever thought possible within the embrace of his love.

Jesus taught us that not only does God love the poor and lowly, God comes among us as one of them. Born into the human family to parents of meager means, Jesus taught his disciples that he came "not to be served, but to serve." Throughout his teaching ministry, he got "down and dirty" with people, touching the unclean, healing their wounds, weeping with them, laughing with them, feeding them. Jesus taught us that to love God is to serve others.

Jesus challenged us to move beyond loving those who love us to loving all people, including our enemies. Because this way of being is so foreign to our biological instincts, which drive us to pursue self-protection above all else, it requires intentional practice. Jesus modeled for us that prayer and solitude are ways we can cultivate the kind of compassion that leads to a transformed life.

As Jesus taught us to live, so he also taught us how to die. He taught us, in the words of our Baptismal Covenant, to "strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being." He was distinctly nonviolent in his approach, but like the Hebrew prophets before him, did not shy away from calling out leaders when their actions benefitted those in the halls of power and privilege at the expense of the marginalized and vulnerable. With Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he refused to say "peace" when there was no peace. He refused to fall in line with the authorities and religious leaders even when refusing to do so led to his death.

Shortly after the Transfiguration, this shining, "mountain top experience" that we remember today, Jesus "sets his face to go to Jerusalem," (Luke 9:51), where he knows he will be killed. He takes Peter, James, and John to the mountaintop for this powerful vision before taking them on that difficult journey because he knows that they will need the spiritual sustenance of this moment when times get particularly dark.

The Transfiguration gives us a preview of the Resurrection: the image of Jesus changed in form but yet still recognizably Jesus, shining with an otherworldly light, being proclaimed God's beloved son, worshipped above all other revered prophets of old, foreshadows his eventual triumph over death through his Resurrection.

On their way down the mountain afterwards, Jesus tells Peter, James and John not to tell anyone about what they have just seen until after "the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

The Transfiguration only makes sense in light of the Resurrection, but the Resurrection cannot happen without walking the road to Jerusalem, the road to death. The disciples may not understand it in the moment, but somewhere in their consciousness, when they find themselves in the midst of despair, they will remember this: the road may be long and dark, but the end result is Jesus standing triumphant, radiant, shining, glorified above all the prophets.

We always hear the story of the Transfiguration on the Sunday before Lent begins. Like Peter, James, and John, we too are given some spiritual sustenance, a "foretaste of the feast to come," before we begin our walk with Jesus to the cross.

As we prepare for Lent, the Transfiguration reminds us that the Resurrection is not far behind. We enter Lent with the image of a shining, glorified Jesus to lead us through the darkness. With this vision before us, we can say with the psalmist, "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4).

We fear no evil because we know that God is with us in the wilderness. God is with us in our pain and God is able to transform that pain into new life. This is the promise of the Christian story and the promise of Lent and Easter. The road to death is lit by Resurrection light. Thanks be to God.