

The Reading of Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I^[a] will make three dwellings^[b] here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved;^[c] with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

The Reading of 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 (Reading from: The Message, 1993)

Lifting the Veil

⁷⁻⁸ The Government of Death, its constitution chiseled on stone tablets, had a dazzling inaugural. Moses' face as he delivered the tablets was so bright that day (even though it would fade soon enough) that the people of Israel could no more look right at him than stare into the sun. How much more dazzling, then, the Government of Living Spirit?

⁹⁻¹¹ If the Government of Condemnation was impressive, how about this Government of Affirmation? Bright as that old government was, it would look downright dull alongside this new one. If that makeshift arrangement impressed us, how much more this brightly shining government installed for eternity?

¹²⁻¹⁵ With that kind of hope to excite us, nothing holds us back. Unlike Moses, we have nothing to hide. Everything is out in the open with us. He wore a veil so the children of Israel wouldn't notice that the glory was fading away—and they *didn't* notice. They didn't notice it then and they don't notice it now, don't notice that there's nothing left behind that veil. Even today when the proclamations of that old, bankrupt government are read out, they can't see through it. Only Christ can get rid of the veil so they can see for themselves that there's nothing there.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

February 26, 2017

Face to Face

Transfiguration Sunday – Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 (The Message)

Kerra Becker English

“The Government of Death had a dazzling inaugural.” I just want to start off by saying that “The Message” – Eugene Peterson’s contemporary English translation of scripture - was not written down in 2017, but was first published in 1993. Starting off here is not meant to be a political statement about any recent inaugural events, and yet this text is a timely one indeed. Paul was trying to get a handle on his new life, a new life that chose him, and made him think of his old life as dead and gone. It helps for us to read passages like these with kind and cautious eyes. It can be too easy to read into this passage the superlatives of the Christian faith. The law is death. Jesus is freedom. The old ways have nothing to teach us. The only steps that matter are the steps we take from this point forward. One way teaches condemnation, another affirmation. Paul had it completely right, there’s nothing left behind that old veil that Moses wore, and anyone who disagrees with his apologetics is now the new heretic.

Now Paul spoke strongly, ALWAYS, and Peterson’s translation probably gets at that dynamic even more effectively than the more classical translations of his letters created by committees of biblical scholars intent on getting the Greek to English precise and correct word for word, and tense for tense. Instead Peterson uses colorful language to capture the emotion that radiates throughout Paul’s conversion narratives. Because that’s what Paul is driving at here. He has been transformed, converted, completely re-made by his face to face encounter with the risen Christ. Life before Jesus was radically different than the life he chooses to live now. It was imperative for Paul that the Corinthians, both Jews and Greeks, GET this message. The only way to capture that in words was with intense contrasts, the kind of contrasts that have been used negatively to disparage the Hebrew tradition from which we all came as Christians, Paul and

Jesus included. I don't think Paul's intent was to be Anti-Jewish here, but to shake up the complacency and the religious and civic arrogance of his hearers and readers. He had to get it across to them that there's nothing for us to hide, nothing to hold us back, nothing to condemn us. Absolute and perfect freedom can only be found as Paul found it – by looking at the very presence of the living Christ eyeball to eyeball.

That's why I say we need to look at this text with kind eyes, rather than with the religious judgment we could lay on it ourselves. Jesus and Paul were both reformers, and we know the history of what generally happens to religious reformers. They are vilified or crucified by those who reject the reformations they suggest, and heralded as “can do no wrong” kinds of heroes by their subsequent followers. The path to spiritual progress is always shaped by the faithful saints who knew God in the past and called into form by those willing to see God directing us toward our future. We need both. We need the law of Moses to help us understand the love of Christ. We need the practicality of Peter to help us understand the passion of Paul. We need the long tradition of the church to inform and shape the future of congregations that look different now than they did even 20 years ago. Life moves on. Religion is in part a compilation of its history, and yet, for it to remain fresh, we still need to have those encounters where we are startled, dumbstruck, and completely transformed by meeting God face to face.

My confession for today is that I usually hate Transfiguration Sunday. Its texts are difficult to understand, and nearly impossible to preach. That's because face to face encounters with God typically are indescribable. Jesus tells Peter, James, and John to not even try to put words to their experience until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. Paul trips all over himself to try to describe how different his life has become beyond his Damascus Road encounter. The only thing to be said about Moses after his mountaintop visitation is that he

returns with a countenance as shiny as the sun. So what does it mean for us to see God without a veil to protect us? How will we describe that life-changing moment when God is no longer represented by the words of a book but becomes a real and living presence in our lives?

There are no easy answers to those questions. Who knows what it is really like to see God beyond the veil? Do you believe someone when they tell you that they have? Mystic or crazy person? Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

But maybe there are a few things we can do to prepare ourselves for such a transformation where God is revealed to us as personal presence rather than chiseled stone or, for that matter, rather than merely chapter and verse. I can't imagine that it was easy for Paul to admit such a transformation in his own life. He was a devout Jew, a respected citizen. He was part of the circle who punished the converted as crazy people in his former life. It certainly seemed as though he was in no danger of becoming one of these mystical followers of Jesus himself. Then IT happened. What IT was is still a bit of a mystery to us, and maybe it even was to him. Christ appeared to him and set him on a completely different path. That kind of conversion happens. It's the kind there really is no preparation to do ahead of time. Sometimes the presence of God is so powerful, so uncompromising, that all we can do is pay attention in that moment, and try to figure out that moment for the rest of our lives. For Paul, his prolific letters were often written in tribute to looking back to see just how much his life had changed in that moment. One of the things we can do to understand the presence of God is to do a little remembering every now and then, as painful as it may be. When we look back, we can sometimes see how God used the same damn mistake or misunderstanding to teach us until we took a reasonable step forward. Sometimes we notice how God intervened with just the right

person at just the right time. Sometimes we discover God in the details brought about by which fork in the road we happened to take.

But for a lot of us, it's a long, slow path to conversion. I find myself more like the disciples who try to get things right, but can't quite shut up about their own ideas until a voice from God reminds them of who Jesus is, and that it might be a good idea for them to listen to him. They listen and learn at the Master's feet – something we continue to do as we find ourselves in the community now known as the church. We try to pay attention to the words of Jesus, the actions of Jesus, the person of Jesus so that we might draw closer to the real presence of God that he embodied in his life and continues to share with us in his spirit. We pray, we meditate, we talk, we listen. We examine our own lives, and get inspired by the lives of others. Sometimes the veil is lifted in our gracious encounters with everyday people just like us trying to show a little more compassion or a little more kindness in their everyday lives. We yearn to climb that mountain to God, and are so surprised and excited when we find out that God has come down from that mountain to be with us. That's the incarnation right there – the very thing that Paul was so ridiculously excited about and wanted everyone to know. God's presence can be known and touched and felt, and it is not in a spirit of punishment or condemnation – but in the absolute assurance of God's love for humankind that came to us in the person of Jesus.

Going back to 1 Corinthians, it is no secret that our glimpses of God in this life are bound to be incomplete, and though they are amazing, they leave us only wanting more... As Paul also says, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Amen.

A Meditation on Compassion and Presence

Dreaming Compassion

Friday, February 24, 2017

Guest writer and CAC teacher James Finley continues to share insights on meditation (another word for contemplative prayer).

Imagine that you have a dream in which you are climbing a high mountain. The valley below is where you grew up, where you experienced pain and made many mistakes. You are trying to transcend and leave this place by reaching the summit, on which you will be sublimely holy and one with God.

As the summit comes into view, the wind rising from the valley brings with it the sound of a child crying out in distress. You realize that there is no real choice but to go down the mountain to find and help the hurting child. Turning back, you descend into the valley. Following the child's cries, you arrive at the very home you tried to leave behind.

You gently open the door and look inside. Sitting in the corner on the floor is your own wounded child-self, that part of you that holds feelings of powerlessness and shame. You sit down next to the child on the floor. For a long time you say nothing. Then a most amazing thing happens. As you are putting your arms around this child, you suddenly realize you are on the lofty summit of union with God!

To be transformed in compassionate love does not mean that you do not have to continue struggling and working through your shortcomings and difficulties. It means learning to join God who loves you through and through in the midst of all your shortcomings. As you continue to be transformed in this way, you come to realize that right here, right now, just the way you are, you are one with love that loves you and takes you to itself just the way you are.

Immersed in love, you look out through compassionate eyes to see the world. Here the dream in which you return to your wounded child-self takes on new, social dimensions. In this expanded version of the dream, you follow the child's cries to the home in which

you grew up. You go inside to compassionately embrace the preciousness of the hurting child. As you are putting your arms around the child, it turns into your mother, your father, brother, sister. It is every nameless face you have passed in the street. It turns into the world that “God so loved . . . as to send God’s only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

God loves and is one with the communal preciousness of all that is lost and broken in everyone. So, too, you begin to realize that you are falling in love with each and every person in the world. As you go on in this love for others, you fail again and again. This is no obstacle so long as you see your failure to be compassionate as just another opportunity to renew your faith in God’s compassionate love for you and for all of us in the midst of our wayward ways.

As our fidelity to meditation continues to deepen, we experience within ourselves how God’s compassionate love uses us for its own purpose by inspiring, even impelling us to do what we can to ease the burden and calm the distress of those around us. Meditation embodies compassion that forms the essential bond between seeking God in meditation and all forms of social justice. The more we are transformed in compassion, the more we are impelled to act with compassion toward others.