

Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSVue)

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 bright as light. 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 will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; 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 raised their eyes, 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.”

Always Being Reformed

I remember taking a few creative writing courses in my life. In all of them, we took a look at what makes a story: the introduction, rising actions, climax, falling actions, conclusions. And while I don't claim to be the most well-versed in story-telling or story-reading, I have seen quite a few that I've enjoyed. For example, I've been watching a lot of TV recently. I started watching, for the first time, *Game of Thrones*. And it's pretty good. I'm liking it so far. I've been playing a lot of older video games, too, either out of nostalgia for what I experienced in my youth or a desire to relive it. It would seem that, from well-known stories to new experiences, that I, and probably most of us, love a good story. To me, it's something about the way a story goes, the rise and fall of the characters, the world around them, as well as finding out what will happen next, that's exciting. Even if it's a story I know well, and even when I know what's coming around the corner, it's still immensely enjoyable to me, perhaps even more so. As we enter into the season of Lent, we find ourselves in the middle of our own spiritual story, as we read the story of Christ, his life, his mission, and his ministry. Let's talk about that.

Would you please pray with me? ...

Our scripture this morning describes an event in the middle of Jesus's story. He is with a few of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, and he is transfigured before them. His clothes become as bright as light, and his face shines with the full glory of God, and the prophets Elijah and Moses appear to speak with him. This scene happens at the top of a mountain, in a place that might feel intimately familiar to many of us—that place of abject joy, as we feel the warmth and light of God, as we perhaps see God's face the most clearly. But, I feel that I'm getting ahead of myself. You see, before we can talk about what's happening now, we need to address the elephant in the room: those first three words, “six days later.”

What happened six days prior? That was when Jesus was speaking to his disciples. They were talking about, rather appropriately, who the Son of Man is. Jesus says that some say it's John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or another Prophet. But Simon Peter tells him, "You," he says to Jesus, "are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." At this Jesus tells Peter that he's right, and more famously, that he is the "rock" on which Jesus will build his church. Jesus also tells all of his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah, swearing them to secrecy in a way that closely mirrors this morning's scripture.

But since that incident six days prior, Jesus had started talking about what it means to be the Messiah, and what he would have to do as part of his social location as the Messiah: he would have to undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and priests and scribes. He would have to be killed, and be raised on the third day. But Peter admonished Jesus for saying such things. I can certainly understand that. Imagine if one of your best friends told you, "Listen, I'm really proud of you, and we're doing great things together, but soon, I'm going to die a violent death." Of course, you would want to stop it! And so Peter says to Jesus that this must never happen.

After listening to this concern, however, Jesus rebukes Peter, (also famously) telling him to "Get behind me, Satan!" What whiplash for poor Peter, hm? Going from being told that he is the foundation of the church, to being called Satan! But while this was likely jarring to him, and to us, it would seem that Christ is telling him that while he has been right about Christ being the Messiah, Peter is also missing the mark of what it means to be the Son of God. I'll say more on that in just a bit.

We fast forward to the following week, where we began our scripture reading for this morning. Jesus has taken three of his closest disciples, who could likely be called some of his best friends, up the mountain to see God. This, of course, parallels another famous mountain climber who saw God—Moses, yes, and Elijah, for that matter. Both of these prophets climbed a mountain and had a vision of God, and Moses himself was also transfigured, with his face similarly shining. So, as a Jewish writer who would have been familiar with the Jewish tradition of the prophets and what they did, Matthew is obviously trying to create a parallel with these other great prophets and Jesus. This portion of Matthew's Gospel, as well as the whole thing to an extent, is doing its best to establish Jesus as the Son of God. Naturally, Jesus's disciples call him such, and God calls him as much in God's own words. "This is my Son," God says, "with whom I am well pleased."

Before God speaks, Peter offers to build three tents: one for Jesus, one for Elijah, and one for Moses. Again, this seems to be a reasonable thing to offer. Whether we understand this to be a tradition similar to building a tabernacle, or a resting place for God, or whether this is simply a gesture that Peter offers so that they can keep camping, the motivation behind Peter's words is clear: he wants to stay here. And again, who can blame him? He's got good views, good company, and best of all, he is in the presence of God. He is on the mountaintop. He feels, he knows, he has achieved the goodness of God, which is all around him. He sees the glory of God,

the light of God, in Christ, and all he knows is that he wants to stay there as long as he can. And friends, again, I must say that I can sympathize with that. I'm sure many of us can, too.

As I said earlier, this story in the Bible is so significant that it has its own church holy day. And while it speaks to a particular moment in time in Jesus's story, and in the story of his disciples, it also speaks to a feeling, to a memory, that many of us likely hold. I think a lot of us have had a "mountaintop" experience before. Whether it was a mission trip, or another holy moment, or just what felt like a sacred time and space: an important milestone in a child's life, a special place that holds significant memories for us, or anywhere else that the veil between our world and the divine gets a bit thinner, we've all been somewhere where we feel the tug of God on our hearts in some way. We've all been to the mountaintop. And like Peter, we may have wanted to build a tent and stay there a while. I certainly did.

In building these tents, Peter seems to recognize that this is a significant moment for him, and for Jesus. But, like his comment to Christ when he says that his death must not come to pass, it would seem that he's misunderstanding what the moment means, even if he grasps the intensity of it. Instead of experiencing it for what it is—a wild, frightening experience, one where he encounters the abject, unbridled mystery and intensity of the living God, he wants to domesticate this moment. He wants to make the story of Christ into something that he can fully understand, including Christ's transfiguration. I may be postulating here, simply guessing, but to me, it seems that Peter wants to live a life that explains the unexplainable. Instead of letting Jesus go, instead of living with him, he wants to remain on the mountaintop with him. Instead of being in the world, instead of serving others along side Christ, it seems that Peter might be content to simply observe it. And again, doesn't that sound familiar?

At this time of year, we find ourselves turning a page in our own Christian stories. We may want to remain on the mountaintop of goodness with God, and I think that many of us do. We want to stay in the light of Epiphany, in the light of every good thing that we know is of God. We want to be with Christ, with the prophets of old, with God. But Jesus does not stay there. Even though he is transfigured here, in this story, into the fullness of his divine identity, he returns to a form more acceptable to human eyes, ears, and minds, before it ends. His face stops shining, his clothes dim, and he becomes more outwardly similar once again to the people around him. He becomes more like the people who follow him, and the people who will condemn him.

But Jesus also invites us to be transformed, to be transfigured, along with him. As he dies on the cross, in an act of love that declares that connection, that salvation, is worth suffering, he includes us—all of us—in that transfiguring love. He includes us in the power of God to make all things new. And this is the hard and holy work, the call of the Lenten season, that we are about to enter.

In Christ, we are a renewed and restored people. Our church proclaims that it is the Reformed church, and always being reformed. I believe that means that, while it adheres to a Reformed theology, and while it is made up of a reformed people, the church is constantly being renewed, restored, redeemed, and quite literally re-formed into the people of God, time and

again. And in these words, in this story, in the season of Lent, we can live into this truth. For this is the season of transfiguration. Lent is the season when we try to understand what it means to be a Christian, and how the constraints that Jesus puts on our lives do not limit us, but make us into better people, more godly people, than we were yesterday.

Just like Moses, just like Elijah, and just like Jesus, being more attuned to God, living as God calls us to live, means that we cannot stay on the mountaintop. If we are going to follow Christ, we need to follow him off of the mountain. We need to go with him back to civilization, back to the streets, back to where we see the corruption and the fallenness of humanity on full display, and we need to meet that sinfulness—our *own* sinfulness—with grace and love. We are not called to hate. We are not called to condemn. We are not called to fully understand the depths of God’s love for all of us, nor are we called to grasp the ways in which God works. But we are called to live like Jesus. We are called into that hard and holy work of reconciliation, of bringing all people, starting with *ourselves*, into the fold of God’s unbridled glory and unconditional redemption.

Let me tell you, my friends, there’s one last point that sticks with me to this very moment: in our last verse in this morning’s reading, Jesus tells Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone about what they saw. They aren’t to peep a single word of what they saw to anyone until Jesus is resurrected. But why do they need to wait until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead? Surely this is the good news that people have been waiting for! But it would seem that the time isn’t right yet. The moment of the story of Christ hasn’t come yet for this denouement to be unveiled. Perhaps resurrection, transfiguration, and all of the reality of the life of Christ—for each of us—is meaningless without the reality of death.

Because, friends, Jesus is not crucified yet. In the narrative of our Bibles, nor in liturgical year, we see that Christ is alive and well. It is before the crucifixion. The truth is that, in stories and in our lives, we can’t get to the next chapter, or to the end, without first going through the hard parts. We can’t get to the cross without going through the life of Christ. We can’t get to salvation without first going through sin. We can’t get to Jesus’s resurrection without first getting to his suffering and death, and realizing our part in it.

When God speaks, and says “This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased,” God seems to confirm what Christ said just a week ago. This is the Son of God, the Messiah, and that means exactly what you think it means. It has the exact implications as Christ said it did six days prior. And we should listen to him! But when Peter is afraid at these words—perhaps not only trembling in fear at the voice of God, but also fearful for what is to come for Christ—Christ touches him and tells him to not be afraid. Jesus is with him. And so, Jesus is with us. He will not leave us, he will not leave Peter, even when he is killed. For the power of God is stronger than sin, stronger than death.

As we begin the season of Lent, let us remember that we are always being reformed. No matter where we are in our journeys, our stories are not yet complete. Neither is Christ’s. Christ continues to work among us, with us, and through us, as we go through this earth. As we transition from the light of Epiphany to the reality and repentance of Lent, let us remember that

Jesus still walks among us. He still has a role to play in this story, and so, therefore, do we. For we are a reformed people, always being reformed. May we see Christ in one another, and may we be the hope for others that Christ embodies for us. And let us be unafraid of seeking forgiveness, and unafraid of what is to come as we forgive others. For Christ is with us, even now. Amen.