

Transfiguration of our Lord February 23 2020

Matthew 17:1-9

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from Father God, Jesus our Saviour, and Holy Spirit... Let's pray:

Brexit, Coronavirus, the demise of Holden; what's next? Change has become such a constant in our lives [there's a paradox for you], that we go to bed at night wondering what the next morning will bring. I'm sure we've all experienced waking up in the morning wondering "what" next and "what do I do now?" Sometimes it's change that we want and other times, it's unwanted. Sometimes we experience the change as positive and good. Other times the change is painful and a loss of something we value. Whether we see it as good or bad, desired or unwanted, change always comes with consequences, challenges, and questions.

How do we live in the midst of change? What stability is there when it seems the world around us as well as within us is changing? What will this mean for us?

I wonder if the disciples in today's gospel might be asking the same questions, and if they too are feeling the wind of change blowing through their lives? Immediately before Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up the mountain he tells his disciples that he must suffer, die, and be resurrected on the third day. He will tell them this again on their way down the mountain.

What happened on that mountain top took place between Jesus' two ominous statements. Maybe the event that we call the Transfiguration, was about preparing and helping the disciples live through the impending change. Maybe the Transfiguration story has something to teach and show us about how to live in the midst of change. Maybe that's why every year the Transfiguration is the

gospel we hear on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday before we enter the season of Lent, a season that focuses on change. Change, whether on the mountain top of life or in the valley of the shadow of death, is a reality for all of us.

I've posited a lot of questions and maybes in this opening section and God's love for us doesn't leave them unanswered. God says three crucial things in Matthew's account of the Transfiguration to alleviate our fears.

"Listen to him."

One of the things I'm aware of in the midst of change, is how many voices begin to speak. Some are outside of me and some are from within.

There are voices of commentators chattering about what's happening and what should be done, voices of judgement, voices of second guessing, voices of fear and anxiety [see climate change]. There are voices of self-doubt, self-criticism, and all the "could'a, would'a, should'a," crowd. Some voices tell us to run and hide, and others tell us to fight and resist. Some voices ask questions and want explanations. Other voices deny what is happening, blame, or declare it to be the end of the world [again, see climate change].

So many voices compete for attention. However, not every voice is helpful or worth listening to. Some voices may sound sweet but they're not good for us. The story of the Transfiguration says there is only one voice to listen to. The voice of God speaks from the bright cloud overshadowing Peter, James, and, John: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; **listen to him.**"

What if, in the midst of change, we resolved to hear and listen to that one voice, the voice of Christ? What if we kept our ears open to what he is saying in our life and world today? To be attentive to what he is saying and doing, to let his concerns and desires become our concerns and desires, to let his way of engaging life and the world become our way of engaging life and the world.

It would mean that whatever change comes upon us, doesn't have the last word. There is another voice. Jesus is always speaking a word larger and more powerful than all the other voices. In the midst of change Jesus speaks a word of life, a word of hope, a word of forgiveness, a word of mercy, a word of beauty, a word of generosity, a word of courage, a word of love, a word of healing.

Jesus speaks a word to and for you and me. Listen to him.

"Get up."

At some time, we've all faced change that has caused us to stumble and fall, paralysed us, left us overwhelmed. Again, this is not about whether the change is perceived as good or bad. It's about regaining our balance and getting our feet back under us. It's about stepping into new life even when we're not sure what that might look like, but trusting the solid foundation our lives are built on.

Matthew tells us that the disciples "fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." Jesus touches them and says, **"Get up."** But it's more than just "get up." A more literal translation would be something like "be raised up," "be aroused from the sleep of death," or maybe even "be resurrected." The word Matthew uses here is the same verb he uses when:

- Jesus heals the paralytic, telling him, “Stand up” (Matthew 9:6-7);
- Jesus takes the hand of the dead daughter of the synagogue leader, “and the girl got up” (Matthew 9:25);
- Jesus instructs the twelve to, “Raise the dead” (Matthew 10:8);
- Jesus foretells his own resurrection (Matthew 16:21; 17:9; 17:23; 20:19; 26:32); and
- The angel tells the women who come to Jesus’ tomb, “He is not here for he has been raised, as he said” (Matthew 28:6).

Jesus comes to us in whatever circumstances of change we find ourselves, touches us, and says, “Get up, be raised.” It’s the promise that though life has changed, it hasn’t ended. Somehow new life is hidden in the midst of change, even when we can’t see it or believe it. God uses the changing circumstances of our lives and world to bring us into new life. I’m not suggesting that God directly causes change to come upon us. I’m suggesting that God never wastes a chance to bring forth new life.

“Do not be afraid.”

Everyone lives with some level of fear. If you disagree, I’ll remind you that this phrase appears 365 times in the Bible – one for each day of the year. A daily and necessary reminder. Change often brings about fear – the fear of losing what we love, value, and desire; and sometimes it’s the fear that comes with getting what we want. In the midst of change Jesus says, **“Do not be afraid.”** He speaks to the heart of the human condition. They are the words we need to hear when we are raised up and back on our feet.

His words don’t magically eliminate our fear. Instead, they encourage us to take a first step into a new and changed life despite our fear, and they remind us that he is with us every step of the way. “Do not be afraid” reassures us that change doesn’t have the final word, Christ does. We’re not called to be fearless but to be courageous in the midst of change and fear.

I don't know what changes you're dealing with. Maybe it's in your marriage, or with your children. Maybe it's the death of a loved one. Maybe it's about your health, your age, your physical or mental well-being. Maybe it concerns your work, your job, your income. Maybe it's a dream or plans that didn't work out. Maybe life is going exactly like you want. Maybe you're on a road to recovery and well-being. Maybe everything has fallen into place and for the first time you feel alive.

Listen to him. Be raised up. Do not be afraid. What if those words are holy wisdom for times of change? What if they are the means by which we step into our own transfiguration? Maybe it wasn't Jesus who changed on the mountaintop. Maybe it was Peter, James, and John. Maybe their eyes were opened and their seeing changed, so that everywhere they looked they saw "Jesus himself alone." Maybe they saw Jesus for the first time as he had always been.

If that's true, and I believe it is, then it means that every change – whether good or bad, wanted or unwanted, joyful or sorrowful – is illumined with divine light and filled with God's presence.

Listen to him. Be raised up. Do not be afraid. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.