

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
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Matthew 17: 1-9

Life is full of questions. Abby is at the age of facing some of those questions that we all face. What will I do with my life? What am I good at? What do I want to study? How do I measure up against others who are on the same track? Who are friends that I can count on, that will remain after all the transitions and changes of the next years? What do I believe, and what practices will I maintain on my own when not told what to do?

Those questions morph as we age, take on new shapes, or perhaps new questions emerge, like who will take care of me when I am old, or will the money last long enough? Have I been a good parent, or a good spouse, or a good friend?

Then there are those enduring dilemmas that we may grapple with, like how long before God answers certain prayers of ours. Why has certain things happened to us? About why injustice goes on, why despotic and brutal leaders are able to effect so many, why innocents fall victim too often?

Sometimes the questions stack up and it is hard to move, hard to know what to do. For Abby a visit day and an audition day at Greeley have been high points, moments where, despite the overwhelmingness of college and all that is involved, she can now envision the next steps, where she senses a place she will belong, where she feels hopeful and motivated and eager.

Such moments of clarity and hopefulness are not ends in themselves, but motivating encounters that give us a instant where we are clear and confident to press on. It is not that all is resolved, but we might feel a greater sense of peace and resolve nonetheless.

The story of the Transfiguration is a moment of clarity that comes in a season of questions also—questions about who Jesus is. The disciples see him growing in prominence, but how far will this go? Jesus still is not that big of a fish in the sea, is he really to be the Messiah or is there another coming after him? How will he gain power when he keeps this Gandi-vibe going? How does he fit into God's plans down through time?

And while it is further speculation, Jesus may have his own questions. I think of his moment in the garden of Gethsemane where he pleads that if this cup can be

passed from him, that would be great, but if not, not his will but God's be done. That moment gives a window into Jesus' own anguish and questions - questions of what would come, of what he would have to face, of what would be asked of him.

In the midst of all that, the transfiguration is a moment of light and clarity. It is a moment when those questions are displaced, or transcended, because God's presence is so close. Such moments of clarity and hopefulness are not ends in themselves, but motivating encounters that give us a moment where we are clear and confident to press on. Those questions may not be fully answered, but they don't have the same power. Instead, there is an overwhelming sense of God's presence, of a connectedness to God's purposes, a closeness, a clarity that comes in God's voice coming down out of the clouds, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased."

The transfiguration is told in a way that harkens back to Moses, God's chosen leader meeting with the Lord on the mountain. For those watching on, or reading about, it puts Jesus firmly in context as God's chosen leader, like Moses, a chosen deliverer. Just as Moses encountered the Lord in light on the mountain, so it is here with Jesus. But if we think of Moses and the Israelites, they are on a journey through the wilderness, reliant of God's daily provision in a place without adequate resources. They are full of anxiety and questions. And so, the meeting with Moses on the mountain reminds them that God is with them out there, that they were not crazy to follow Moses away from Egypt, the breadbasket of the world, out into vast swaths of unknown.

Even so, for the Israelites, they only wanted so much of God's presence. They wanted God's help, God's resources, God's deliverance, but to get too close to God seemed dangerous. Back in Exodus 20, we hear, "when all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'" They wanted God's blessings, but did not want to get too close.

We hear a touch of this in the transfiguration, for when the disciples hear God's voice out of the clouds, "they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." And yet, even so, the disciples also propose building temples or shrines there, to make it a worship site, because it was clearly a holy place that they would want to return to, a place where one could count on finding God's presence. And despite their fear, Jesus' response is to not fear. So, despite the intimidating or daunting realities of God's powerful presence, in the New Testament there is a greater desire to see God, to know God, to be close to God. Jesus' death and resurrection will bring a

peace and reconciliation that means we do not need to fear God, nor stand at a distance.

But even so, the New Testament also makes it clear that the closer we get to Christ, the more he brings change in our lives, the more the light exposes, the more he asks of us in a journey of discipleship. And so, we might be a little timid to get too close, might prefer, like the Israelites, to just to plod along at a safe distance hoping for God's blessings, but not too much of his presence.

Why the transfiguration? For us, it tells us something of who Jesus is, more than just a good teacher or a kind person, but a new Moses delivering God's people. For the disciples, it does this also, but also gives a moment of encounter that gives confidence and hope. It is a moment when God's presence and purposes are not veiled, but clear and overwhelming. It is a moment that reminds us of what we seek, to encounter God, to be transformed in and by the light.

In our earthly journeys, we don't get to stay there, at least in a sense. Such moments of clarity and hopefulness are not ends in themselves. We must press on. For the Israelites, it was to press on towards the promised land. For the disciples, it was to follow Jesus through the ups and downs of going to Jerusalem, his fateful last trip. For us, it is to continue the journey of discipleship, to continue to be the church, Christ's body at work in the world.

It is a moment of clarity that helps us to press on, but it is also a reminder of what we seek – to know God, to be in God's presence without fear, to be transformed by the light, so that when we come down from the mountain, we have something to offer to others, some glow that comes from being with God. Not just opinions or advice, but some peace and clarity that comes from being with.

As we begin our Lenten season this week, we press into the calling and possibility of being a vessel of God's light. Meaning, like Moses, to encounter God so closely that we carry some of that light with us. Meaning, like the disciples, to carry that sense of what we seek, to live in God's presence, to draw closer to God's purposes.

Our sermon series in Lent is encountering Christ. The idea is to use this season to draw closer, to seek a closer connection to God and to the Christ, rather than plodding along at a distance. The season of lent has often involved giving up something. The idea is to alter your rhythms in some way to make us more mindful and attentive to God, to seek a deeper connection. That can be aided by giving something up, or taking on a new practice, or engaging with a book or some study during this time.

It is an opportunity to seek a moment of clarity for the journey, to be so close to God's presence that we have something to offer others, and to be reminded of where this spiritual journey is headed - that through Christ, not only does God offer his help to us, but through Christ, we are invited into God's presence, the Spirit indwelling us, at work in us. To be with God and to be absent of fear.

And so, may the moments of clarity in our own journeys, and may the Transfiguration, give us the clarity to continue the journey, to remind us that God is with us, and to remind us of what we have to offer others, and to remind us what we seek – to know God and to be known.

And all God's people said... Amen.

The Transfiguration

(Mk 9:2–13; Lk 9:28–36; 2 Pet 1:16–18)

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 will make three dwellings 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; 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.”