

Sermon, February 19, 2023
Matthew 17:1-13

“Transfiguration”

The Transfiguration is one of the more unusual gospel stories, and it is loaded with symbolism. It is preceded by the first of four passion predictions by Jesus, speaking about his forthcoming death and resurrection, as well as his rebuke of Peter for not accepting what the near future holds. Yet, Peter is one of the three disciples that Jesus brings to the mountaintop with him. These three, Peter, James and John, appear to be an inner circle among the 12 disciples. They are the same three that on the night of Jesus’ arrest go with him to the garden of Gethsemane.

In the 16th chapter of Matthew, Jesus says to Simon, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church...”. There is a play on words going on here that can only be seen in the original Greek. First Jesus says, “you are Peter”. In Greek the name is Petros, which literally means ‘a small stone’. But then Jesus says, “upon this rock I will build my Church”. Here the word is not petros, but petra, which means a large rock or boulder. What this suggests is that this one person, Peter, will become the foundation of the large entity called the Church. And we can see Peter as the foundation of the church, because, in the Book of Acts, he is the first to proclaim the Gospel on the day of Pentecost, and he was the first to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Next, we come to James and John, who are brothers - in the Gospel of Mark they are referred to as the sons of Zebedee, but Jesus also gives them a nickname, calling them the “Sons of Thunder”. It’s not exactly known why he called them that, but, in various places in the Hebrew Testament, thunder is equated with the voice of God, and being among the first evangelists, James and John will certainly speak on behalf of the Lord.

Skipping down to the end of today’s reading, the disciples ask Jesus why the scribes insist that Elijah must come first, that is, before the arrival of the Messiah. This belief was based on a statement in the fourth chapter of the Book of Malachi, which reads, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes”. But Jesus tells them that Elijah has come, but he was not recognized. The disciples then realize that Jesus was talking about John the Baptist. But was John the Baptist really Elijah? In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, an angel comes to Zechariah and informs him that his wife, Elizabeth, will have a son named John, describing him as having the power and spirit of Elijah. In other words, John was not literally Elijah, but one who bore the power and spirit of the prophet.

Back to the beginning, Jesus leads the three disciples to a high mountaintop.

In the culture of the time a mountaintop was believed to be the meeting place between heaven and earth - also making it a place of revelation. Matthew loved to draw parallels between Jesus and Moses. In Exodus, God reveals the Ten Commandments on top of Mt. Sinai, and on a mountaintop, Jesus reveals the essence of his divine nature. Then, in both Exodus and Matthew, God's voice comes out of a cloud. Also, when Moses comes down from the mountain his face is bathed in a great light, just as Jesus is also all aglow.

When Jesus and the three disciples are on the mountaintop the voice of God comes out of the cloud and repeats the very same words He spoke on the day of Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". But then adds three more words, "listen to him!" Now that the disciples are made aware of the true nature of Jesus' being, God insists that they pay attention and follow that which he teaches them. And what lies at the very heart of what Jesus teaches? Well, in chapter 22 of Matthew a Pharisee asks Jesus what commandment is the greatest. Jesus replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" ...And the second is like it: You should love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (That last part offers a clue as to why Moses and Elijah appear alongside Jesus when he is transfigured. Moses represents the law, and Elijah, the prophets.)

This brings us back to the issue of the great light. In chapter 13 of Matthew, Jesus speaks of the day of the Lord, i.e., the coming of the kingdom of God, saying, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Indeed, the great divine light is transferred to us when we choose to listen and obey. When we choose to love both God and neighbor we become, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "The light of the world". He continues, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven".

Jesus is the great light, who transfers that light to us when we listen, and we, in turn, through acts of love transfer that light to the rest of the world! Amen.

Let us pray: Holy God, gracious and eternal, you are beyond our knowing, yet we see your glory in the face of Jesus the Christ, whose compassion illumines the world. Transform us into the likeness of the love of Christ, who renewed our humanity so that we may share in his divinity. Today we offer our prayers for the transformation of the world and the church. You revealed your glory and presence in your beloved Son Jesus. In receiving our prayers reveal the presence of your Spirit alive in the world today, free us from all doubts, and empower us to act as a transfigured people...Amen.