

February 14, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

God, source of all light by your Word, you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, that our hearts and minds may be opened to know your truth and your way. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 2-9. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The story of the transfiguration is a very strange story. No matter which of the synoptic gospels you read it in, it’s still pretty weird and scary.

I remember in my Greek class in seminary, we were translating this passage and I got to verse three and I really almost couldn’t believe that in the Greek it does literally say that Jesus’ clothes were so white you couldn’t bleach them. I just found it so strange there was an ancient Greek word for bleach. Or if there was, that it would be used in the gospel.

But besides weirdly white clothing – there are also the disciples who are terrified and then a brief appearance from Moses and Elijah and then God breaks through and just tells them to listen to Jesus.

It’s all very abrupt and strange. But this story is important.

In Mark’s gospel – it takes place right in the middle of the gospel. Halfway between Christ’s baptism and resurrection. The turning point.

So why is it so important? Before I answer that – we have to note what's not important. What's not important is exactly what happened to Jesus when he was transfigured. You don't need to know exactly what the transfiguration means.

The importance of this story, this experience high on a mountain, is not trying to discern a rational explanation of what happens when someone is transfigured. That is to say, it's really not so important to understand how bleached his clothes were.

The reality is, as Matt Skinner puts it, is “the transfigured Jesus isn't supposed to be figured out. He's supposed to be appreciated. We should be drawn to him, as if we were moths.”

But what is important – is what the transfiguration does for us. It celebrates all that we can see, it celebrates our own intimacy with God. The transfiguration transforms us. In the transfiguration we can see Christ.

We – us – the disciples can see Christ in all his glory, his divinity. In this story we are Peter and James and John. The disciples sometimes get a bad rep in the Gospels – they follow Jesus, but they don't always get it. They fail him often. I think we can all relate to that, I most certainly can.

And the disciples - they don't often get to hear the voice of God. For instance, in previous chapters of Mark's Gospel Jesus is baptized. It's a story you are probably familiar with, but there is a fact that is often overlooked.

In Jesus' baptism, a voice comes down from heaven and God speaks, “you are my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

God speaks YOU are my son – God speaks it directly to Jesus.

It's not clear or assumed that anyone else sees the heavens torn apart or hears God in that moment. That moment was for Jesus.

As readers of the gospel, we are but a fly on the wall – eavesdropping in on a moment we weren't invited to.

The transfiguration is different. Jesus becomes a beacon of light, unable to miss. And Peter and James and John very clearly see him and Moses and Elijah.

And then God speaks “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” THIS is my son – third person.

God is speaking directly to the disciples, directly to us.

It’s a reminder and a promise that Jesus can and will be noticed.

Epiphanies aren’t always subtle. Here, Jesus practically demands to be seen. To be known. In this way, we are invited to celebrate all that we can see.

So often we get overwhelmed with the unknown – what is our future, who really is God, what comes next. The transfiguration invites us to take a step back and celebrate what we can see – what is known. What is right in front of us. And that is Jesus Christ.

It begs us to ask the question – where can we see Jesus now? Where is Jesus now, in our world today, shining like a beacon of light, demanding to be noticed?

Moses and Elijah – perhaps they are there too on that mountain top – to teach us what it means to see Christ. To teach us to look where that beacon of light is demanding to be seen.

Moses and Elijah are two of the greatest prophets in Jewish history. Many things about them make them great.

For one thing, like this transfiguration on the mountain, they both shared abnormal experiences with God.

Moses’ first encounter with God is the burning bush that is not consumed, and Elijah encountered God in the fire that burned the altar – even though it was drenched in water. They, too reinforce that God can be found in the abnormal – that perhaps God, like the transfiguration, isn’t always meant to be understood. They both shared such intimacy with God.

Exodus 33 tells us that the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks with a friend.

In first Kings 19, God speaks to Elijah in a gentle whisper. Both moments filled with intimacy, both moments so tender that assumes relationship.

And their lives teach us what it means to see Christ. Both Moses and Elijah like Jesus, sought to bring hope to God’s people as they suffered the

injustices of abusive political systems. Perhaps to see Christ's light is to keep this hope alive. As God's people endure injustices in systems built on greed and inequality, to see Christ means to walk with those who have been left behind, left to suffer, and to keep the flame of hope alive as we move forward towards God's kingdom.

The transfiguration – Christ a glowing light alongside Moses and Elijah – those who had such closeness with God – it shows us that God desires that closeness with us. With you and me. But this closeness is not to be hoarded. It is not meant to divide, no closeness with God brings community.

It energized Moses and Elijah to serve and it does the same for us. It energizes us to serve, to follow Christ, knowing that God is with us, in relationship with us and each other, each step of the way.

Every time we gather for worship. Whether it be in this sanctuary, or at home – we are James and John and Peter. We are the disciples on the mountain seeing Christ bathed in light. And we hear the voice of God speaking to us: This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him! Listening sounds simple, it sounds self-explanatory – but perhaps it isn't. To listen to Christ, we need to be those disciples on the mountain – seeing Christ bathed in light alongside Elijah and Moses.

We need to be transformed. Transformed to take up our cross and follow Christ. As Jesus transfigures in the company of Moses and Elijah there for us to see, as God breaks through as speaks to us – we are transformed. We see Christ. We are given the intimacy with God necessary to take up our own cross, to follow in the footsteps of Elijah and Moses.

This transfiguration Sunday, I invite you to take a step back, to look and celebrate all you can see. And perhaps, in doing so, you see where Jesus is shining as a beacon of light. Where God is speaking directly to you.

The transfiguration is for you. For me. For us. Do not be afraid. Thanks be to God. Amen.