

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 99
2Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

From today's gospel: "This is my Son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

For the past several weeks, the gospel lessons from Matthew have come from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This week, we hear about Jesus back up on another mountain, but this time it's a very different kind of story—the story of the Transfiguration.

This winter in the Adult Forum we have been discussing the gospel of Matthew, and we have discovered that Jesus is often compared with Moses—both figures escape murderous leaders as infants, both emerge from Egypt into the promised land, both have an important role in receiving and interpreting Hebrew Law, and, of course, both encounter God on mountains. We see this parallel quite clearly in today's lections. In the reading from Exodus, Moses ascends Mt. Sinai to receive the law, taking along Joshua, his valued assistant. Likewise, in the gospel reading, Jesus travels up a high mountain with Peter, James, and John. In the two stories, the events on the mountain are different, but there is a similarity that doesn't show up in the portion of Exodus we read today—if you look several chapters forward in Exodus when Moses descends from the mountain, you will see that it says that his face was glowing from the encounter with God, very similar to the way in which Matthew describes Jesus in today's gospel. The Transfiguration story also very explicitly connects Jesus with Moses—Moses is one of the two Hebrew prophets who appear to Jesus and his three friends, cementing the connection between the ancient prophet and Jesus.

So, this connection clearly is quite significant – Jesus is portrayed as the fulfillment of the law given by God to Moses, and over the last several weeks in the readings from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been offering his interpretation of that law. But today's story – the story of the Transfiguration – is not about the law, it's about Jesus' identity, who and what he was.

Typically, the Transfiguration is seen as a revelation of Jesus' divine nature. This makes sense—back when Jesus was delivering the Sermon on the Mount, he might have seemed very much like other Jewish teachers of his time, but in **today's** ascent on **another** mountain, all kinds of wild things happen. Jesus experiences an otherworldly transformation, long dead prophets suddenly appear, and God's voice emerges from a cloud—clearly Jesus is not simply an ordinary human being!

So, yes, the Transfiguration is an affirmation of Jesus' divinity, of his identity as God's son. But, if we look at the scene a little differently, we can also see that there are aspects of Jesus' **humanity** that come through in the story—there are elements **we** can relate to in our own lives that can provide inspiration for all of us.

First of all, Jesus didn't go up the mountain alone—he took trusted friends with him. Now, this may have partly been in order to have witnesses to Jesus' transfiguration, but I expect it was also simply for some support. Jesus was stepping into a new experience—he didn't know what would happen at the top of that mountain—and he needed friends with him—don't we all? Shouldn't we all reach out for support when we need it; and, likewise, shouldn't we be willing to offer that kind of support when someone asks?

Second, we don't really know for sure what caused Jesus to go up the mountain that day, but I am guessing that part of the reason was that he needed a little reassurance and perhaps some inspiration from God. At the point in Matthew's gospel that this story occurs, Jesus is well into his ministry of teaching and healing. He has already predicted the suffering and death he will endure, and he is only a few short chapters away from his fateful entry into Jerusalem. Like all of us, after working hard and knowing that more challenges are to come, Jesus needs to pause and connect with God; he needs to know that God's love will sustain him. When God's voice booms from the clouds and says, "This is my Son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased; listen to him," it is not simply a command to Peter, James and John to continue to follow Jesus, it is also a comforting statement to Jesus himself. We all need to know that we are beloved by God, that we are pleasing to God, and Jesus seems to have been no different. Jesus knows he has to head back down that mountain and face what most humans never have to face, and the unconditional love of God that he experiences on that mountaintop will help him through it.

The words from God that Jesus hears during his Transfiguration --"This is my Son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"—are the exact words that Jesus heard at his baptism, another moment in which Jesus must have needed reassurance and inspiration as he began his ministry. We celebrated his baptism at the very start of Epiphany back in early January, and today we close out the season of Epiphany with this same proclamation, "This is my Son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Jesus is God's beloved, and we are God's beloved. Jesus needed to hear those words, and so do we. Just as Jesus did, we need to find our "mountains," our places and times that we can connect with God and know, deep in our soul, that we are loved. This might happen here in church, at prayer or in meditation anywhere, during our practices throughout Lent, or during a walk outdoors—anywhere we can slow down, unplug, and allow ourselves to experience the love that is God flowing through us. And sometimes we need to take friends with us on our journey as we seek strength and guidance. Our faces might not glow, and our clothes may not turn a dazzling white, but our hearts can carry the spark of God's love with us as we seek to live lives of justice and compassion. We need to experience this so that we, too, can head back down that mountain, reassured of our own unlimited worth and inspired to spread the love we have experienced to every beloved creature of God.