

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene
Transfiguration Sunday
Sunday, February 19, 2023
10am

Text: Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

The last time I preached on Transfiguration Sunday, it was February 2020. That was the last Sunday I preached in the sanctuary at First UMC Olympia before the pandemic lockdown began. Ironically, I spent a portion of my sermon reflecting on the impact of the internet on our spiritual lives. Three weeks later, our worship service had moved entirely online. It stayed exclusively in that space for thirteen months.

I am learning over and over again that God delights in upending our assumptions, including our assumptions about worship. The week before we closed the sanctuary doors and wandered into the pandemic wilderness, I was sitting for my final ordination interview with the Board of Ordained Ministry. I had spent years preparing for that moment and building my skills in leading worship. I had written essays on worship, deconstructed the ancient fourfold order in our hymnal, analyzed the evolution of worship practices from the early church to the present, presented and annotated my own orders of worship. I thought I knew what worship was – until I found myself a week later awake at 2am on a Sunday, desperately trying to upload a worship video so we could have church later that morning. My internet connection was achingly slow, probably because I was just one of millions of pastors uploading last minute services to YouTube that night.

That first experience of doing ‘virtual church’ felt anything but worshipful. It felt chaotic. Disorienting. The service lacked a lot of the customary elements. There was no music, no offering, no candles on the altar and light streaming through stained glass. Simply prayer and a Scripture reading and a word from God. But despite the chaos and disorientation, that first online service was holy. And here’s why: Because that service was about our desire for the voice of God and nothing else. We longed to know what God had to say to us amid the uncertainty filling

those early pandemic days. We were forced to strip away the things we thought were necessary – the organ, our favorite songs, the choir, the rituals – and lo and behold, we discovered that God was still with us! And more importantly, God was where God should rightfully be: At the center of our worship. It really didn't matter that the way we worshiped looked and sounded different and was broadcast over the internet into our homes, because the Spirit of the Lord was still in that place.

[pause]

At the beginning of our Gospel story Jesus leads Peter and James and John up a mountain, and when they reach the summit, he is transfigured before them. The glory of God radiates from his body. One interpreter writes that Jesus “slipped off the human skin and let the God bones show through.”¹ Jesus lets the God bones show through and in that moment the disciples know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is more than just a rabbi with a radical message and the power to perform miracles. He is the Messiah, God's Anointed One.

The disciples are stunned, overcome by what they are seeing. James and John are silent, awestruck. But Peter manages to put a coherent thought together. He thinks he knows what the next step is. He offers to begin construction on three dwellings: one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. What Peter likely had in mind was the Tabernacle, a tent structure that housed the divine presence when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. Our Bible Year study just finished reading about the construction of the tabernacle, which came with a whole set of rules and expectations for what worship should look like. Peter is concerned about building a proper space of worship to house the glory of God now revealed in Jesus.

But before he can finish describing his construction plan God interrupts him. “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased” (v. 5). The same words God spoke from heaven at Jesus' baptism, only he qualifies them with the following command: “Listen to him!”

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/transfiguration-sunday/transfiguration-sunday-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/transfiguration-sunday-year-a-preaching-notes>

Listen to him. It's a simple command, but it's also a rebuke of Peter. He is too eager to start building on holy ground. Instead, he should let the vision of the Son of God fill his soul with the truth of who Jesus is.

[pause]

A Jesuit priest named Fr. Pedro Arrupe once wrote:

“Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”²

Peter thought he was being practical. He thought he was honoring God with his concern to build a tabernacle for Jesus. But the thing that most honors God is not where we worship or the words we speak or the songs we sing, though these are certainly beautiful offerings to God when they are offered in the right spirit. God is most honored when we listen to God's Son. Because when we are listening to Jesus, we come to know the heart of God. And God's heart is Love (with a capital 'L'). That Love transfixes us. It transfigures us. Like Fr. Arrupe wrote, it seizes our imaginations, obliterates our assumptions, and transforms our priorities. Above all, Love keeps us focused on what is most important. And what is most important is our relationship with God and our relationships with each other.

[pause]

² <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/prayers-by-st-ignatius-and-others/fall-in-love/>

In the kin-dom of God, our first responsibility is to worship. Worship is the foundation for everything we do as followers of Jesus. Worship is entering into the presence of God and letting the glory and power of God’s presence transfix and transfigure us. We are gathered in to God’s presence, fed by that presence, and then sent out with the Holy Spirit as changed people, carrying the Good News of Jesus into the world. That is the definition and the rhythm of worship. We can have that experience whether we worship with the organ and hymns or drums and the Praise Team. We can have that experience whether we are in a church building or worshipping online, driving down the road or gathered around a table, standing on a literal mountaintop or deep in the valleys of life. We can have that experience alone, in a small group, or standing in a congregation of people. None of those places or things are necessary for worship. Because as God reminds Peter and reminds us, what matters is the posture of our heart when we come to worship. Do we come believing that God is in this place? Do we come ready to listen and receive what God has for us? Do we come praying, *longing* to see God more clearly, love God more dearly, and follow God more nearly?³

Friends, worship is holy whenever our hearts are set on celebrating who God is and who God has called us to be in Jesus Christ. I am sure the Tabernacle in the wilderness was beautiful. But its beauty can never compare to the beauty of a heart that has been transfigured in Love. When we approach worship with open hearts and open imaginations, we can be awestruck by the wonder and glory and awesomeness of our God. I thank God for those thirteen months of online-only worship. They were hard months, but they transfigured my imagination for who God is and what the church can be, and I am a better follower of Jesus for them.

[pause]

On Wednesday we descend into the wilderness of Lent. God knew what awaited Jesus and his disciples at the base of the mountain: a long, slow march toward a different mountain, the mount of crucifixion. “If any want to become my followers,” Jesus said, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24). Soon only Jesus’ words, and the sight of him transfigured as the Son of God, would remain when his followers saw him handed over to the authorities and nailed to that cross.

³ https://hymnary.org/text/day_by_day_dear_lord

But today, friends – today we stand on the Mount of Transfiguration and we celebrate the words of the psalmist: “Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy” (v. 9). So let us rise now and worship our God. We are standing on holy ground.

[transition to singing “Holy Ground”]