

Transfiguration A 2017, Matthew 17:1-9, February 26, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

What do we make of this story, known as the Transfiguration of Our Lord? It always appears here, on this last Sunday of what we call the Epiphany season, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Jesus appears on a mountaintop, his body transformed into a brilliant light shining as a thousand suns, conversing with Moses and Elijah, his disciples stumbling over their words, completely terrified. This odd, mysterious, almost ghostly story; light shining from within, prophets of long ago speaking with Jesus, heavenly voices thundering from the mountain top. It almost seems too fantastic, too heavenly, to have any real earthly relevance. The practical side of me wants to ask, what's the point here, what's the life-lesson I need to take away from this and apply to the day to day existence of things I must face during the week?

Maybe that's your question too. Maybe that's why you come to church; to hear something you can take with you and turn over as you go through your week. A piece of practical advice, a little word from God that gives you some perspective on your situation at home, or something you're dealing with at work. Maybe it's just a word of encouragement to help you face a particular tragedy or an ongoing troublesome illness. You come to church hoping to hear such a word and that's ok. God wants you to hear his word of encouragement, his word of hope, his word which can be applied to the real, day to day situations you face.

That's why it's hard for me, and maybe for you as well, when the word which comes to us is a story of a fantastic vision of a supernatural occurrence. When was the last time any of us experienced such a terrifying, fall on your face, mumbling incomprehensibly, vision of the holy presence of God? I know I haven't. There are times when I wish I would. Seeing such a thing would make faith all the much easier. Then, when troubles come, and faith is shaken, I could just say to myself, "but I've seen the glory of the Lord. I know he's real, just like I know that my name is Kurt and I'm married to Lois. I don't have anything to worry about."

The Transfiguration of Jesus plants us squarely into the realm of mystery and majesty and myth. Yes, I said myth. Myth and mystery are very much related to each other. Mystery and myth are words which can make us uncomfortable, or bore us to tears. We are a digital, WiFi, plugged in, computerized, electronic, rational, "I'll believe it when I see it," modern people. Myth is a word that conjures up primitive, superstitious, telling stories around a campfire trying to keep away the spirits, bygone era. It's a world we think we've largely outgrown, moved beyond and left behind for a modern, gleaming, intellectual, logical and practical life-style.

We hear the word "myth" and most likely we think of a false story, or at the very least, something which can't be proved by scientific evidence. But that's not what a myth really is. A myth is a story which reveals a deeper and more profound reality than any scientific evidence can give us. A myth helps us see and understand something about ourselves, the world and even God, that neither an electron microscope probing the building blocks of matter or the most powerful telescope peering into the depths of space can reveal.

The existence of God can neither be proved nor disproved. What makes life so wonderful lies beyond the realm of provable fact. Did God make the universe? Will we live beyond the time

we have here on earth? These are questions which cannot be answered by scientists. But they are important questions, timeless questions. But science can't prove or disprove the answers of our faith.

Myths are for those of us who have not ourselves experienced the reality of the vision but who still live by the truths that vision reveals. I have come to believe the Transfiguration of Jesus was indeed a very real experience for Peter, James and John on that mountain. In that experience they saw the glory of God shining in and through this man they had been following throughout Galilee. While I think it would be awesome and terrifying and humbling to experience something like that myself, I choose to live my life in the reality of this story. It tells me something profoundly important about God and the mystery that is the intersection of God and human life.

I think to understand our place in this story we need to see the story's place in a larger context. The Transfiguration comes at a crucial transition in the earthly life of Jesus. Up to this point he has been traveling throughout Galilee teaching, preaching and healing the sick. He draws large crowds, and his teaching is public. From this moment on however, Jesus turns to a specific destination. He is headed to Jerusalem, the great central city for his people. There, events will culminate in his trial, crucifixion, death and burial. Just a few verses before this story Jesus speaks of the death that awaits him. Matthew the gospel writer tells us, "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and on the third be raised." The Transfiguration is a foreshadowing of the end of the journey, the end of the story. It gives us a preview of Jesus' destination. The cross is one important step along the way, but it isn't the end of the journey. We are not left, thank God, with Christ disfigured and abandoned, dead in the grave. Jesus will rise from the dead in glory.

For the disciples, this mountaintop vision will only make sense after they witness the events which take place in Jerusalem. At this point they cannot understand what's happening with Jesus. This is the important point, what Peter and James and John see is not just the goal of Christ's journey, but the goal of their journey too. Even as Jesus tells them they must take up their own cross and follow him into the pains and tragedies of their world, they too will shine like the sun and be filled with the glory of God.

If this vision is the goal, the end point of Peter and James' and John's journey, it is also the goal of our journey as well. Our destination also is to shine with the transfiguring light of God. Christ came to transform us and reveal to us our true selves, the men and women we are intended to be. We are meant to live with God in glory. We are meant to live with each other shining with the light of God in and through us. That we often fall far short of God's intention is a sad reality of human life. Still, that's why this vision is here, that's why we are permitted to glance into its glory, to see our true selves shining with light by the love and grace of God.

There is story is told of a young soldier on the Western front during World War I, the awful fire and smell of the trenches, with shells exploding all around him and surrounded by wounded and dead soldiers and he turns to a fellow soldier and says, "We weren't meant for this." We weren't meant for a world that cruelly forces the weak and powerless into a life of begging and selling themselves for a meal. We weren't meant to live in a world where children

die of a preventable disease or from hunger and malnutrition. It is a heart-less, and godless myth, which says “that’s just the way it is. The strong survive, the weak perish.” It is the false and empty myth of literalism and materialism and empty promises of a world whose only reality is what can be observed and quantified and categorized.

But the transfiguration of Jesus shows us a different world, a more real world, because this world shines with the very light of God. It’s not that this other world won’t touch Jesus, or us. Jesus tells Peter and the rest not to speak of what they witnessed on the mountain top until the Son of Man rises from the dead. There may be times when we will experience hardship, loss, the breakup of relationships, severe illness or even the death of someone we love. We may be tempted to lose our faith and say, “that’s all there is, just what you make of it, no hope, no life after death, no eternity.” But we live by another story, a story which tells us of one within whom the divine light of heaven shines even though all the cruelty and chaos of a world gone mad was arrayed against him. Jesus is the source of that story, our story. We are meant to shine with the light of God, the light of Christ in and through us. Amen.