

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

THE TRANSFIGURATION

A sermon preached the 26th of February 2017, Quinquagesima Sunday, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Matthew 17. 1 – 8.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

— Matthew 17. 1 – 8

Peter had big dreams for Jesus. A week before his transfiguration, Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter replied, "You are the Christ. The Son of the Living God." *You're the miracle man, Jesus. You're the one who can make dreams come true.* Moments later Jesus began to talk of going to a cross, of suffering greatly and being killed, and Peter said, "God forbid. This will never happen to you." Peter was a "can do" kind of guy; he believed the point of having a Messiah was to avoid cruel indignities like a crucifixion. But Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan. You're setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Of all the disciples, Peter's the one I can relate to most easily. He has committed himself to following Jesus. When called upon, he can usually come up with the right answer. And, except for when it really would have counted, he loves Jesus. But he doesn't understand him. So when Jesus invites Peter to come with him and spend time on a mountain, it was a confused and disillusioned disciple who followed. That is a portrait of most followers of Jesus — confused about where he's leading us, and disappointed that his plans are not our plans.

How many times have you looked at a desperate situation, where the need for Jesus to make a dream come true for you was obvious? What dream have you cherished that God wouldn't rescue?

If you love Jesus, if you follow him as Peter did, then sooner or later you're going to have a lover's quarrel with him. Not just because Jesus won't give you what you want, but because he won't do even what

you're sure *he* wants to do. That's the dilemma. We're adult enough not to expect that we'll get everything we want; but we're confounded when Jesus doesn't come through on his *own* desire for peace, justice, and healing the broken. Why does he insist on heading for the cross?

When you find yourself confounded, you're ready to climb the mountain. In the scriptures, mountains serve as unique ground for the divine-human encounter. It was upon Mt. Sinai that Moses stood before God, and upon Mt. Horeb that Elijah heard God's still small voice. Now it's up to another mountain that Jesus takes Peter along with James and John, two other disciples who have big dreams.

If you've ever stood on the top of a mountain, you know why God would choose such a place for these encounters. The tops of high peaks are barren, intimidating places. People don't belong there. There's nothing to protect you: no trees or shelters, just a lot of wind. If the weather changes, you're so exposed you could die on the spot. To locate yourself there is to place yourself in the hands a power that you cannot control, a force you cannot resist. That's the attitude you should have in worship. You shouldn't come to this altar feeling you're in control. To worship is to appear before the Most High ready to put away the illusion of control, or of even knowing how to dream.

Mircea Eliade, the late historian of religion, used to speak about a legend that was told in the mountains of Nepal. According to the legend, in the cool air of the mountain top, a wax god sat in solitary splendor,

the shrine of the village that sat in the valley below. After generations of worshipers climbed their way to the top of the mountain, there came a time when some decided to bring the god down from his chilly citadel and establish him in the center of the marketplace. He was convenient then. Worship wasn't such a bother.

But in the warm sun of the valley, the wax god softened. The villagers discovered that this allowed them to make a few changes in their god. Those who thought his countenance too severe molded a smile on his face. Soon the god looked just as approving as they wanted him to look. In the heat, he continued to sag, so the villagers began to take away the wax to give light to their homes, until all of the wax, and all of the god, was gone.

When we fashion God in our own image, when we treat God as a wax nose, we find that we have no god at all. True worship doesn't drag god down to us. Rather it takes us up to a fearful encounter with him. That is what *Book of Common Prayer* liturgy is designed to do — to lead you up to frightening new terrain.

Once Jesus gets Peter to the top of the mountain, Jesus is then transfigured into a more glorious figure than his disciples imagined. "His face shone like the sun. His garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared Moses and Elijah talking to him." But *that* is not the frightening part for them. They were, like Peter, ready and waiting for something big, and this was the biggest Jesus yet. This is the Jesus Peter hoped for, bright and shiny, hanging out with Moses and Elijah. Without missing a beat, Peter suggests a building program so they can stay right there and capture the glory.

As Peter is announcing his plans to build the three booths, the voice of God interrupts him, booming, "This is my Son the beloved. Listen to him!" Listen to a voice calling you to a more profound understanding of what it means to be involved with God. Listen to the Beloved. When the God of the pillar of fire and cloud

speaks, *that's* when the disciples fall on their faces. Glittering Jesus, the Jesus of their pet dreams, doesn't frighten them. But hearing the voice from the pillar of fire and cloud which forces them to listen to a Son who's been saying he is headed to the cross, *that* drives them low to the ground with fear.

Follow Jesus to the cross and that's where your dreams have to go as well. And this is where we are, my brothers and sisters. It's *Quinquagesima* Sunday: we're on the precipice of Ash Wednesday and Lent. This is where Jesus always takes his disciples, into the wilderness and, soon enough, to a crucifixion.

Preachers will warn you about divine judgment, as they should. But I tell you a secret: the deeper reason to fear God is because he loves you. The Most High is no milquetoast. God's love is impossible to control; it will lead you to places you do not want to go. It will destroy the life we make, you and I, for ourselves.

"And when they lifted up their eyes they saw no one but Jesus only." That's incredible. They didn't see Moses or Elijah, any of the old hopes, or even their fears. They saw only Jesus. And they were now able finally to start trusting him for they began to see him for who he was, transfigured from being the weaver of their dreams to being the One who would love them to the end.

It is the nature of God's love to bind itself. That is what Jesus sets about doing now, moving away from his own safety, walking headlong toward Gethsemane and the cross. At his baptism at the Jordan; at his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee; on the mountain with Moses and Elijah — by the power of the Spirit, Jesus is binding himself to his *exodus*, his departure, his death. He does this, beloved, for you. At the Sacrament of the Altar, he places himself, his body and blood, in your hands, and you take it upon your very lips. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA, Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501, or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org www.facebook.com/St.Stephens.Belvedere