

**“A Glimpse of Glory”
Matthew 17:1-9
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Transfiguration Sunday
February 26, 2017**

Preaching and teaching have been a lot easier in 2017 than any year I can remember. Most years when I teach adults about Calvin’s doctrine of total depravity – that sin is so deep humans can’t escape it, I get a lot of pushback. This year the Adult Confirmation Class was like, “*clearly!*” Most years I have trouble explaining why Jesus is so strong with his disciples about letting their light shine, or why the Beatitudes necessarily mean Christians will be in conflict with the world. This year, there’s no assumption otherwise. And most years when I read the Transfiguration story, my first impulse is to wonder how I’m going to convince a bunch of thinking people that you really should stay open to supernatural visions of Jesus transfiguring before a few disciples, showing up with some dead prophets – that you shouldn’t just dismiss it as pre-modern falsities. But this year my first impulse is less of a thought and more of a yearning. A yearning for the same assurance that those disciples get – that the Way of Jesus is not folly, that it doesn’t just end in death. That the Way of Jesus has deep roots in the liberation led by Moses and the prophetic power of Elijah. That even when the road ahead looks like a dead end, God’s justice is absolutely assured. The neighborhood God promises is absolutely assured. The peace Jesus promises is absolutely assured.

I wanted that assurance this week when a colleague told me about the immigrants she knows who have their suitcases packed and ready by the door, ready to flee not the violence or hunger in their own country, but fear they now know in ours. I wanted that assurance when I learned that some parents of children in city schools have been asked to rank whether they’d rather have 40 kids per teacher in classrooms or no arts class or no professional development for their teachers. I wanted that assurance when one of our leaders asked if an immigrant teenager who escaped the gangs of Central America to make it to our community; who worked a janitor every day after school let out until 11pm at night; if he could come here when the ICE raids start. Because for him this church might be the only chance he has for not being afraid.

Frankly I don’t care whether anything supernatural happened on that mountain with Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Apologizing for faith, or defending it, as if we need the acceptance of others for it to be true, is less and less interesting to me. *I* want the assurance the disciples got that day. That God is present and active on the road to the cross. That Jesus’ way of living is our best hope. That the crosses that nations erect to crucify those most vulnerable among us are the very places where God is present and ready to act. *I* want that kind of assurance.

Because we’re going to need that kind of assurance heading toward the cross *this year*. Let’s be honest. Most years in Lent we just pretend that we’re headed toward the cross. We give up chocolate for forty days, we try to be more intentional about praying, we try to curse less or exercise more. We engage Lent like a weight

loss program – trim ourselves up a bit, take better care of ourselves. But who among us actually engages Lent as though we are being prepared for suffering, as though we are being prepared for loss, as though we are being prepared to be tested to see whether we run from the people our government hangs on crosses or whether we stay there at risk to ourselves? Who among us engages Lent as though we might be called to face some crosses we may not how the power to stop? Who among us engages Lent as though our walk with Jesus might require us to give up something we cling to much more than chocolate, something in the center of our lives?

It's encouraging, to see that the suffering that God is preparing us for isn't something that God sends on us, despite some popular theology to the contrary. It's not God who gives suffering that we should be able to handle. It's an empire that traffics in crosses, that hangs people there. Black history month ought to remind us of that. Fear is the main tool of empire. Fear leads to "othering." "Othering" leads to scapegoating. Scapegoating leads to violence. God doesn't send that sort of suffering on people. That's the devil's business. We don't do Lent because God is some kind of sadist who enjoys watching us suffer.

That clarification is important because it means that Lent doesn't have to be the downer we expect it to be, the downer I have to say we in the church sometime make it out to be. The point of Lent isn't to glorify suffering, it is to strengthen our capacity to endure it. We do Lent because we need the discipline of soldiers who deprive themselves in training so they're ready for the real thing. We need the discipline of teachers-in-training who are rigorously evaluated all along the way so that when they are released into the classroom they are ready for the challenge. We need the skill of the phlebotomists I go to at Johns Hopkins. I asked the phlebotomist one time to explain to me how it is that she can get my blood with almost no pain. "There are two things you need to know, honey," she told me. "The first is never let a doctor draw your blood." "Nothing against doctors," she told me, "but they probably do 10 sticks before they let them lose on patients. They make us do 300 supervised sticks before they let us go." "What's the second thing I need to know," I asked her. "Knowledge is no substitute for practice."

We do Lent not because God wants us to suffer but because we need the practice. We need the practice *not to flee* the crosses that are rising up on the horizon. We need the practice *not to flee* the children of this city who need adults of to do right by them. We need the practice *not to flee* the families of new immigrants who are the latest victims of human sin. We need the practice *not to flee* Muslims in our community who are the latest scapegoats among us. We need practice to walk to the cross.

And you cannot make that walk without otherworldly power to strengthen us before we get there. You cannot make that walk without the solid conviction that an ethic of self-preservation rarely leads to the freedom God promises. You cannot make that walk without the assurance that there is a God who shows up in liberators, in prophets, and in the most ordinary of human beings, who is also God. Jesus takes a few disciples up the mountain to catch a glimpse of his power. He allows them to see that there is more to him than what most other people will see. A vision they can hold onto when all the world will see is another brown skinned Jew,

another poor man, another human being discarded by empire . A vision of God's power to steady them when the road less travelled is the one that leads them to danger, to suffering, to the cross.

Peter wants to stay there. Stay up on the mountain far from the crosses we find down in civilization, high up away from dangers, toils, and snares that human beings create. I know that temptation. Up where the air is cool. Up where the morning mist cleanses everything. Up where the river streams call you to lie down and stay awhile. Like Peter we sometimes need a reminder that the whole point of mystical experiences, of seeing the glory of God, of cathartic worship is to be sent out. It's what equips us to face the reality of the world. Worship of God isn't complete until we get out there and pursue assignments. Maybe some years we need a reminder that transcendent experiences are supposed to send us into the world not keep us out of it. To fill us up on the mountain so we can come back down for another round. The whole point of the Church isn't to fill people with heavenly visions so we can disengage from the world we're living in.

But I don't think we need that reminder this year. I think we all know we can't stay on the mountain. We don't get to stay there. Which is exactly why we need to get up there for a little while with Peter and James and John. Get up there and share the vision. Get up there, glimpse God's power, and file it away deep in our hearts. Get up there and believe so that when we come back down the mountain into all the muck and the danger and the fear that is before us we won't lose hope.

We won't lose hope of a beloved community where violence is put down, opportunity is lifted up, and the legacy of slavery is overcome in our city. We won't lose hope of a world that welcomes war refugees instead of fearing them. We won't lose hope of a city that has the resources it needs turn around the schools once and for all and do right by all children. We won't lose hope of building a world where immigrants don't have to cross borders to feed their families or escape violence. We won't lose hope because we will have seen a vision of a Crucified God – one who doesn't shrink from suffering – but loves us and our world that deeply – enough to suffer for our sake.

We won't lose hope because we will have seen a deeper truth of God's power flowing like that cool stream through the mountains of human history, cleansing every doubt, giving us the assurance that we need that Immanuel is here. God is with us.