

Today is Transfiguration Sunday!

If that doesn't mean much to you, no worries.

Let's take a step back and look at part of our church calendar so we can understand where this fits in the larger context.

Okay, so we have Advent, which is the 4 Sundays before Christmas, then we have Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, then we have what is called the Epiphany Season.

This begins on January 6th, 12 days after Christmas.

And the Sunday immediately after January 6th is called the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, in which we hear the story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan, by John the Baptist.

Now, this Epiphany Season goes all the way from January 6th until today, Transfiguration Sunday.

Today is always the last Sunday before Lent begins, or it's the Sunday immediately before Ash Wednesday.

(And for those of you who need a reminder, our Ash Wednesday service is this Wednesday night at 7:00pm. All are welcome.)

On this Sunday, we always hear this same story we just heard, of Jesus in glistening white, on the mountaintop alongside Elijah and Moses (who were long dead), and this spectacle was witnessed by Peter, James and John.

But.

One thing that I think is really interesting is something that this story AND the story of Jesus' baptism both have in common.

Listen to this passage from Jesus' baptism: *"just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'* (Matthew 3: 16-17)

Now listen to this passage from the Transfiguration story we heard this morning, *"While he [Peter] was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased...'"* (Matthew 17: 5).

Right after we celebrate Jesus' birth, the importance of his identity is affirmed by God through his Baptism, and right before we begin our Lenten journey to Jerusalem and the cross, again, the importance of his identity is affirmed by God to his followers.

Now, I want to talk about the word 'transfiguration,' for a moment, because I don't think it's in our daily vernacular.

Maybe we can glean some understanding of the word from the Harry Potter books.

In that series, the students at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have to take a course in, you guessed it, "Transfiguration."

There they learn how to change teacups into rats or flowers into candles.

And to most people's minds that is pretty much what "transfiguration" is, too: it is a change of state from one thing into something quite different.

What I find sort of confusing about this passage is that yes, Jesus changes while he is up there on the mountain.

The text tells us that, "*his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*" (Matthew 17:2)

However, then he changes back to being a "normal" human.

After the disciples are overcome with fear upon seeing Jesus in this unusual state, he goes over to them, tells them to get up and not be afraid, and then they begin their descent down the mountain.

While they are walking down, he tells the three disciples not to tell anyone of the vision they saw until he has been raised from the dead.

So, what's the big deal with this transformation, if Jesus just goes back to being who he was?

Well, it's multifaceted.

On the one hand, this reveals to Peter, James and John, that Jesus is divine, or set apart, and they need to continue to follow him for the rest of his mortal days and beyond.

But I also think that this vision serves to change, or transfigure, the disciples!

I wonder if Jesus knew of Peter's reluctance to follow him into dangerous territory, to stay faithful to him even when it was risky.

I wonder if Jesus wanted to do something dazzling so that Peter might finally understand, inside his dense brain, that he was called to follow Jesus through whatever trials and tribulations they were going to encounter.

Peter might've had his doubts, and so Jesus felt like he needed to take him up on the mountain to show him something basically miraculous (and I think a voice speaking from a bright cloud that says, *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*), qualifies as miraculous),

so Peter might finally commit to taking the hard path with Jesus rather than taking the easy way out.

We also know that change, for the most part, is hard.

And we don't like to do hard things, we can talk ourselves out of doing difficult things, we come up with excuses.

But maybe Jesus thought, if Peter sees me literally transform next to visions of Elijah and Moses, then maybe he'll finally get that the scope of my ministry is bigger than all of us, and he really does need to be a leader in this movement.

Maybe he was trying to offer 'proof' to Peter, to a certain extent.

And what's funny is that Peter's reaction to seeing Jesus be transfigured is the typical reaction you'd expect from someone who is anxious about change and wants everything to calm down.

And so he says, okay, if this change is the new normal, then let's settle in as quickly as possible.

I've got it, I will build dwelling for each of you, Jesus, Elijah and Moses and we can just move in, up here on this mountaintop, and will all be so happy and comfortable.

Now, if he'd even thought for a moment about the fact that 2 of the 3 figures were apparitions, he would have realized how ridiculous he sounded, but that's how we act when we are anxious and afraid.

We do irrational things.

We try to move from being uncomfortable to comfortable, as quickly as possible.

People generally don't like change, systems don't like change, churches especially have a reputation for resisting change.

It causes anxiety and makes people unsure of their future.

One of my mentors used the model of the mobile to illustrate change.

She said, people don't mind being shaken up, as long as they can settle back down into exactly how they were before.

The problem with that is that no real change is produced.

And people and systems can't improve unless they are willing to, you guessed it, change.

One of my personal mantras is that everything we need to know, we can learn from nature.

And guess what?

The rule in nature is: adapt or die.

That's what the entire theory of evolution is based upon, and I don't think human systems, whether churches, businesses, political parties, academic institutions, the healthcare industry, or anything else, can survive if they aren't able to change.

We have to be in a constant state of evolution so that we can continue to get better at what we do, knowing that we will never fully arrive, because once you arrive, you stop changing.

Pope Francis had some wise words about people of faith and the nature of change.

He said, *"To put it simply: the Holy Spirit bothers us.*

Because he moves us, he makes us walk, he pushes the Church to go forward.

And we are like Peter at the Transfiguration:

*'Ah, how wonderful it is to be here like this, all together!'
But don't bother us.*

We want the Holy Spirit to doze off...

we want to domesticate the Holy Spirit.

And that's no good.

Because he is God, he is that wind which comes and goes and you don't know where.

He is the power of God, he is the one who gives us consolation and strength to move forward.

But: to move forward!

And this bothers us. It's so much nicer to be comfortable."

(Pope Francis, *Encountering Truth: Meeting God in the Everyday*, 21st century)

It is so much nicer to be comfortable, amen to that.

But if we are going to be faithful Christ-followers, we need to learn the same lesson Jesus might have been trying to convey to Peter, you have to be willing to get uncomfortable.

They couldn't build dwellings and stay up on that mountaintop because they were needed down below, in the trenches.

But that mountaintop experience was still important, they needed that moment of collective transformation from on high, so that they'd have the faith to follow Jesus down a very difficult path.

And I think that Jesus might have known his disciples would be a bit apprehensive because he said something to them, which alludes to their fear.

Jesus comes over to Peter, James and John and tells them to *'Get up and do not be afraid.'*

You don't tell someone not to be afraid if they aren't afraid.

What gives me hope about this passage is that even though Jesus was asking a lot of his disciples, he never left their side.

Up the mountain, during the transfiguration, on the way down and back into his daily ministry, he never left them.

On the night of the Last Supper, and Good Friday, and Easter Sunday, and even after Easter Sunday when he reappeared to the disciples, he never left them.

Change is really hard, but it's not so bad if you're journeying with the right people.

When you realize you are all in it together, you have the courage to do things you've never done before, to be a better institution than you were before.

We, as the church, are in this together and God still abides with us every step of the way.

As we approach Lent, we are moving into a season of personal change when we are asked to do some deep self-reflection and to engage some of the most jarring scriptures in the New Testament.

But through the journey, we will be changed for the better, if we remember that we need not be afraid, because we have each other and we are guided by the Holy Spirit during this time of personal and collective transfiguration. Amen.