

## Wesley United Methodist Church

February 26, 2017

“Right in Front of our Eyes.”

Matthew 17:1-9

2 Peter 1:16-21

Jesus invited his closest disciples Peter, James and John to go with him up on a high mountain. There, Matthew tells us, Christ was transfigured before them.

Transfigured is not a word we use very much. A teacher in a Sunday School class was reading the story of the Transfiguration. As she read she noticed one little boy seemed confused. When she was finished, she asked him, “Jimmy, why don’t you tell us where Jesus was in this story,” He replied, “Oh, he was on a mountain.” “Yes, that’s right,” said the teacher, “do you remember why he was up there?” Jimmy answered with a confused look, “I guess that’s where his arithmetic class was held.” Now it was the teacher’s turn to look puzzled. So, she asked him what he meant by this. “Well,” Jimmy replied, “The Bible said, “Jesus went up on the mountain and there he began to figure.”

Did you know that children improvise if they don’t understand? Adults just drop the subject...

Fortunately, Matthew tells us what “transfigured” means. Changed. He writes about the Master, “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” And it isn’t the end of the story.

Just then the disciples saw two other individuals on that high mountain talking with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Make no mistake about it, this was a once in a lifetime experience. Peter, who always seemed to need to make a comment said, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” But while Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came up to them and touched them. “Get up,” he said, “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

But later Peter did tell about this experience. How could he keep it forever to himself? Peter wrote two letters which are included in the New Testament. In the second one he wrote: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18).

This is significant. At Jesus’ baptism, a voice from heaven was heard saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We find this in Matthew 3:17 and every time the voice of God is declaring, “This is my Son, whom I love; With him I am well pleased.”

They saw Christ transfigured, they saw Moses and Elijah who had been physically dead for hundreds of years standing there with him, and they heard the voice of the Almighty. This all happened right in front of their eyes. There could no longer be any doubt that this man was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And yet...just a short time later Peter would be denying he ever knew Jesus and James and John would be hiding behind locked doors as if they had no knowledge of Christ’s power and his purpose. How do you explain this?

We can’t explain it except to say...they were very much like us. They had faith like a yo-yo. Sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes almost to the ground. It was only about a week before the Transfiguration that Jesus had asked his apostles the question, “Who do people say that I am?” Who was it who answered him? It was Simon Peter, of course, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus praised Simon, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it...”

And then Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. And how does Simon Peter respond to this? He takes Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, “Never, Lord!” he said... He didn’t understand. He had just affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah the Son of the living God and then he turns around and tries to tell him how to go about his business.

Now, a week later, he’s up on a mountain offering to build booths for Christ, Moses and Elijah. And very soon he will be standing in that courtyard where someone will ask him, “Aren’t you one of his disciples?” And he will declare with an oath, “I am not!”

Friends, Simon Peter is us! We’re just as wishy washy in our faith. One moment we feel close to God that we’re willing to give him all that we are and hope to be and the next moment, in a time of testing, we deny we ever knew him. How

do you ever explain it? There is only one way the disciples were human, just like you and me. They were full of good intentions, but poor in execution.

This is one reason we are so grateful for God's grace. Everyone who is serious about his or her faith struggles at some time in his or her pilgrimage. The only people who don't struggle with their faith are the ones who are not committed at all.

A successful business man once traveled to India to spend a month working in one of Mother Teresa's shelters. He longed to meet her, but Mother Teresa was traveling, and it wasn't until the day before his departure that she had time to talk with him.

When he was finally in her presence, much to his surprise, he burst into tears. He felt an enormous sadness when realized that he missed so many opportunities in his life to give of himself and his resources. Without a word, Mother Teresa walked over to where he was seated, put her hands on his shoulders and looked deeply into his eyes and said, "Don't you know, that God knows you are doing the best you can?"

And God does know. God knows our hearts. And God loves us with an everlasting love. And out of that love God has given us a gift.

We are all in constant danger of backsliding, of slipping away from God. If Peter, James and John were in danger after their experience with Christ, how much more in danger are you and I of allowing our hearts to grow cold and our lives become indifferent to Christ's claims?

That's the importance of being in worship each week, that is the importance of sharing in small groups with other believers, that's the importance of immersing ourselves in the Scriptures to guard against the chaos of our soul. The natural tendency when we're away from the presence of God is to allow our faith no matter how real it is in our lives, to slip away. Grace is free, but faith is always fragile. The casual believer asks, isn't it dangerous to proclaim a grace that is totally free? What motivation do people have to stay strong in the faith, if they do not have to fear God's judgment? Only a person who has never really struggled with faith would ask such a question.

There is a story about Abraham Lincoln. According to this story, Lincoln once visited a slave auction. He wanted to observe, not participate. He watched the unspeakable indignities of selling and buying human beings. His response was a mixture of disgust, sadness and outrage. As he stood there a young woman was brought to the block, her eyes and body language screaming defiance and hatred. She had been used and abused by her previous owners and now it was going to happen all over again.

The bidding began, and to everyone's amazement, Lincoln offered a bid. As the price went up, so did Lincoln's bids until the auctioneer declared him the buyer. He paid her price and then went over to where she was being held. All her animosity was focused straight on him. He looked at her and simply said, "You're free." Dripping defiance and distrust, she said, "Yeah, free for what?" Abraham Lincoln answered, "Free to do anything you want to; free to go anywhere you want to go." Her appearance changed as she took in his words and realized he meant what he said. Lincoln repeated himself: "You're free...free to go anywhere you want to go." She answered, "Then I'm going with you!"

And that's what the Transfiguration is all about. In our own way, each of us has been to the mountaintop at some time of our lives. "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). But we are sinners. We love him, but in time of testing, we have each denied him. We are grateful to be recipients of his grace, and we commit ourselves again this day to seek in all we do to be close to him from this day forward. Amen.