

Transfiguration Sunday 2023
2.19.23

2 Peter 1:16-21

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Matthew 17:1-9

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 Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (358)

The voice from the cloud said, "Listen to him."

I figure we should.

But Jesus is remembered to have said a lot. Especially in this gospel narrative, the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is remembered to have said a lot. This is, after all, the gospel of the Sermon on the Mount, a three-chapter long passage which isn't in any of the other three gospels.

In this one, Jesus is remembered to have said a lot.

The thing is, the voice from the cloud is remembered to have said this in the other synoptic gospels, as well: "This is my son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Even though Jesus is remembered as much less talkative at least in Mark and Luke, there too the voice from the cloud said it: "Listen to him!"

The fact that this event on this mountaintop is told in all three gospels: this isn't always the case. Many are the stories in any given gospel that aren't in all, or even sometimes any, of the others. This one, however, is; and this makes it so we hear of this event every year, every liturgical

year. Whether we're in the year following Matthew, as we are now, or following Mark or Luke, we hear this story, the so-called Transfiguration (a word Matthew alone uses). And we hear it every year on this Sunday, so-called Transfiguration Sunday. Always the last Sunday in the season after the Epiphany, the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, following this event we find ourselves in Lent, we find ourselves in those six weeks of preparation for Holy Week, for the cross.

This is all the case because in all three gospel narratives this event marks a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. With this climb up a mountain with Peter, James, and John, with this appearance on the mountain alongside Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, which is to say the tradition of Jews of which Jesus is an inheritor, something with this has changed.

I mean, something other than Jesus himself now transfigured (a word Matthew alone uses).
Jesus: now given form beyond any normal human form.

This, of course, seems like an endorsement, an authorization. With this, God is as bestowing on Jesus an authority akin to the authority Moses came to exercise back in the day, who himself became aglow for his proximity to God's sheer presence. Receiving the Law of God from God for the people, Moses had such authority that now the people had a way to live together, and under some pretty harsh circumstances. It was akin also to the authority Elijah would exercise. As the earliest of the great prophets, Elijah's speech could become act, his power with a spoken word such that what he said is what was done, just as with God, who said, "Let there be light!" and there was light.

And we've known this about Jesus, that he is authoritative, that he can be trusted, which is what true authority is. With the word "author" tucked in there, authority to my mind is the power to name what's real. Those with authority have integrity between speech and act, between naming and the reality being named, to *author* reality. There's a similarity there, a symbolical closeness.

Conversely, where an increasing distance between the symbol and that which it's meant to symbolize, between the sign and that to which the sign points, there's a fading from the truly symbolical into the deceptively diabolical. The diabolical is that wherein the transient thing to stand in for the enduring thing doesn't match, isn't true. There's a deception there, a symbolical distance or even division.

You look at a thing that's green and I tell you it's red: that's me being diabolical, the symbol I employ to indicate the reality before us not matching.

You look at injustice and I tell you it's justice: that's me being diabolical, the sign I use to indicate a reality at play being mismatched, in opposition. "That's not justice," you say. "That's injustice," you correct me in my abusive use of power and naming.

I say, "Peace, peace!" where there is no peace, and you, like the prophet Jeremiah, reject such quieting, such worldly deceiving. You want *justice*, the thing that matches the word for the thing.

The world is full of deceptions like this. The world is brimming with the diabolical in this way, a deceptive use of words, a deceptive use of the power to name and declaim, an abuse of authority.

Authority is the power to name what's real. True authority is when such honest naming can be trusted, proves true. True authority is when the one who claims authority demonstrates such power and the ones who are folded into the place of such exercised authority test it, confirm it, eventually confer it with their trust and their adherence.

Authority has taken a beating in our society these days. For all the information we have at our fingertips, for all our access to people and places near and far, we're as vulnerable as ever to people whose claim of authority is false, diabolical. We're as confused, even dumbfounded, as ever about whom to trust, whose authority can be trusted as true, what even is real and how to call it, how to name it.

God has here decided to make it obvious: "This is my son; listen to him!"

It isn't the first time, according to the story, God has chosen such obvious means. At the baptism, the voice came as the spirit of God came down on him: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." At the birth, there was tell of the new star in the sky, unfixed, wandering, until it found its place over the house where Jesus had been born. Now, this: Jesus having taken Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, Elijah and Moses called upon to show up, a dazzling show of God's radiant presence, an unmistakable sign that in Jesus God had come close, very close—Jesus the sign, God the enduring reality; Jesus the word, God the one of which to speak and in whom to live.

Matthew alone uses the word "transfigured" here, as you by now know. This in Greek is "metamorphosed." Mark and Luke say only that Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah, and appeared as dazzling. Matthew, however, uses this word, which I've never heard used in any context other than this.

I like it, the English translation, because neither half of the word—neither “trans” nor “figure”—is easy to pin down. “Figure” can be a noun or a verb, and can point to things of mathematics, art, even interpersonal dynamics, as in to figure prominently in something, which names something ineffable or multi-faceted. “Trans-“ is that which is across or beyond, a crossing of a boundary, a breaking in or out or through.

What our gospel writer might mean in using it here is that, with this event, it’s all the more revealed that Jesus figures in history and beyond it, that Jesus is a figure of humankind and also beyond that. Here we have a blurring of a line we’d otherwise assume is clear and fixed, an interplay of realms we might rather assume are untouchable to one another.

People will often say Christianity enforces a dualism. There’s the material world and then there’s the spiritual world, according to some in regard to this proclaimed faith; there’s the body and then there’s the soul in Christian doctrine, so say some. They’ll further say Christianity blesses one and condemns the other, the world of the spirit clean and blessed, the world of the body gross and fallen.

And to be fair, there are scripture passages that seem to suggest this duality. Paul especially can be read as if he signs on with such an easy assumption.

But this is an utter misreading of Christianity, which a more careful reading even of Paul will make clear. This is an utter dismissal of what’s radically true about Christian claims: that there is no such separation, that the body and the spirit are both wrapped up in God’s love and aim and end. Truly, the witness that is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who is also the Son of God, is that God abides in the body—the world’s body, the human body—more absolutely than anywhere else.

Ours is, terribly, irretrievably, a religion of the body, which understands the body as the house of the truth, our enfleshed relating with one another as the test of the truth, and our consuming of God’s body as our participation in God’s abiding spirit, which is insistently manifest in material forms.

In the Transfiguration, what is in the “trans” is an intermixing, that which is of here with that which is of the beyond.

For all this, we are wise indeed to “listen to him”—though we might yet wonder what exactly we’re to listen to him saying, for he said a lot, especially according to this gospel narrative.

And so it might be that we’re simply to listen to all of it—all that he said, and moreover all that he, as the Word of God, represents, indeed that he, as the word of God, makes present.

But we might decide to start at a point of greater focus.

We might simply choose to look at the last thing he's remembered to have said, which, it turns out, is a good place to start because the last thing he's remembered to have said is that the Son of Man 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 day be raised. This is the case in all three synoptic gospel tellings of this event. In each of three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the divine voice demanding that we listen to Jesus, or at least that Peter, James, and John listen to Jesus: it follows immediately on this thing that he said, 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 day be raised.

Three times he would say as much, according to all three synoptic gospels. Three times he would teach this. And in each case, the first time he said it was just prior to this mountaintop transfiguration and this voice of God trying to cut through all the confusion, not to mention the fear and shock this seems to have unleashed, to cut through all of that: "Listen to him!"

See, because Peter didn't. Not at first, and only eventually hardly. Peter actually denied that any such thing must happen. "God forbid it, Lord," he even said in rebuking Jesus, "This must never happen to you."

This, because Jesus had just before asked the disciples who people were saying he was. And they answered that some were saying he was John the baptizer, while others said he was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" which had Peter for one answering, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Which might well have surprised Jesus to hear it. Peter wasn't always known for getting things so exactly right, wasn't prior to this moment, and often wouldn't be following this moment. But for now, for right now, he was right on, which might have perhaps brought the rest of the disciples to this point of right on.

This is the one whom they'd been following all this time.

This is the one whose long preaching and regular wonderworking they'd paid such close attention to.

He was the Messiah.

Of course.

And now it had been said out loud.

So now they could begin really enjoying themselves—the privilege of having this person in your company, the world-historic privilege of hanging out with this one, long promised, much

anticipated, the one who'd set everything to right, through force and might, the only way any such thing is to be done. Now they could really get busy.

Peter's correct confession (and was it even perhaps a guess?) seems to have triggered something in Jesus—but not that he could finally unleash his real intent and his real power. On the contrary, it seems to have given him permission at last to say what more needed to be said, which was not that he'd drive the Romans from the land with supernatural force, and not that he'd further crush all sources of oppression (as if this wouldn't itself be a mirror-move of oppression), but 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 day be raised.

But then Peter: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Which move was not unlike all those temptations Jesus had faced in the wilderness, all those various ways to establish power without having to suffer. Power *without* suffering. Yes; yes, please! Make bread of all these stone, feed the masses, capture the masses, get them to serve you! Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple and be carried to safety on the wings of angels, put on a great show, dazzle the masses, capture the masses, get them to serve you. Satan, the accuser, the adversary, it was who tempted him in the wilderness, the one who'd have Jesus be an altogether different sort of Messiah than the one he was to be, which is to say a much more typical messiah to the one many were expecting and even betting on.

No surprise, then, that Jesus had the response to Peter he's remembered to have had: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind on human things, not divine things.”

Following this, he would speak to the disciples of such things: that justice isn't to be founded by any means other than self-giving love. Would that it were! Would that we could get to justice simply by beating the bad guys, knowing of course who the bad guys are, right? Would that justice could be established simply by killing them, crushing them, wiping them off the face of the earth—this mirror-move of evil.

No.

Jesus would take Peter and James and John up a high mountain, where God himself would simply say of Jesus: “Listen to him.”

Jesus withstood strenuous temptation in the desert, temptation not to suffer, temptation to do things that would effectively prevent him from suffering. But he could only barely withstand

the same temptations from friends. Because it's one thing when your enemy taunts you, tempts you. It's another thing when your friends do it, without even meaning to.

Something indeed changed on that mountain, and not just that Jesus became dazzling for that moment. From here, he would head to Jerusalem. From here he would head to the cross. Because maybe his friends were ready.

Thanks be to God.