

February 19, 2023

Year A: Last after Epiphany - Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9)

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One of the few upsides of getting old, and easily tired, is that I can give myself permission to relax and indulge in my favourite pass-times more often. One of my favourites is murder mysteries. Not nasty, gruesome, gory murders, but the sort that happen in pretty little English villages, full of charming and eccentric characters, living well-mannered and tidy lives, punctuated by weekly murders.

Part of the fun is trying to guess who is the murderer. It's usually a charming old lady, a soft-spoken vicar, or a quiet little man playing the piano in the corner of the parish hall: the last person you would expect. Somewhere near the end of the story, there is a moment of amazing transformation, when you find out that the sweet old lady is actually a retired KGB assassin, the soft-spoken vicar is a disguised axe-murderer, or the quiet little man likes to bash people on the head and throw them in the river.

That's the formula: you find out something completely new and shocking that changes everything you thought you knew about a character. If you picked up on all the clues earlier, you get to say "See, I was right! I knew it was him!" If you didn't catch the clues, you are astonished and amazed, and you gasp in surprise and say "I never would have guessed it was him!"

Today's gospel story, on the surface, looks like it should have been that kind of surprise revelation, – an "I never would have guessed" moment. But not if you'd been following the plot and picking up the clues. And the disciples had. This was not an astonishing and amazing revelation for them. Quite the opposite: this was a "See, I was right! I knew it was him!" moment.

Immediately before this trip up the mountain, Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was, and Peter had answered: "You are the Christ." They already knew

that. It wasn't a surprise. This strange experience just confirmed what they had already figured out for themselves from all of the other clues they had witnessed.

We refer to this story as *The Transfiguration*, and we can all imagine it. There are six characters: Peter, John, James, Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Two of those people had already been dead for quite a long time, so that's one clue that it's no ordinary scene. Bright lights and loud voices coming out of nowhere give you two more clues.

Matthew's readers might have found it hard to picture the scene, but we don't. We live in a world of special effects and CGI. We can story-board this scene in our heads. We probably know a few people who could create a short video of it on a laptop in ten minutes. The big screens in our family rooms show us fire-breathing dragons, ghostly apparitions, and alien monsters every day. Our imaginations are so sophisticated that we have no problem 'seeing' what Matthew describes.

But Matthew's readers didn't have the big screens, and might have had trouble visualizing the scene. On the other hand, they would have picked up some things that go right over our heads. Matthew's readers would have been much more struck by all the little elements in the story, and how they explain the scene.

Moses and Elijah were the very embodiment of the history of the Hebrew people. Their entire body of scripture – our Old Testament – was all about the Law and the Prophets, the very basis of their faith and nation. The first five books are the books of Moses, who brought the law of God to his people, and the remaining books are all stories of the prophets who interpreted and lived out God's relationship with his people, beginning with Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets. Everything the Hebrew people knew and believed came from Moses and Elijah.

The mountain top held a special significance as well. Moses went up the mountain to

meet God and receive the commandments (as we heard in our first reading). Elijah went up the mountain to meet God and receive his commission as a prophet. The mountain top was the place where the great leaders went to commune with God. The mountain top, the cloud, the light, the voice, these were all powerful symbols of touching the divine.

The presence of Moses and Elijah in this scene shows that God's relationship with his people throughout history has now converged on Jesus. The message is that Jesus is the culmination of the Law and the Prophets. And this mountain top moment, when Peter, John and James get a fleeting look at the divine, confirms for them that there is a divine plan, and that they know who Jesus is.

We all have mountain top moments, with or without the actual mountain. Mountain top moments give us tiny glimpses of the divine behind the ordinary; the mystery beyond the mundane; the sudden touch of something that you can't put into words suddenly. Mountain top moments sometimes happen at great significant events, but often also in tiny moments: being surprised by the sparkling beauty of an icy morning, or the perfect bloom of the first daffodil; moments when something touches your heart and soul in a way that cannot be explained.

Mountain top moments are fleeting. They are the scenic lookouts in the journey of life; the moments when you pull over just to take in the view before you move on. You can't stay there. You can remember the feeling and the view, but you can't stay there. And that's an important element of today's story too.

Moses met God at the top of the mountain – and when he came down with the ten commandments, with his face still shining from his divine experience, he found that at the bottom of the mountain, life sucked. It was so bad down there that he lost his temper and smashed the stones with the commandments on them. He had to leave the

mountain top behind and get down there to sort it out.

Elijah met God on the mountain, when he was so discouraged that he just wanted to die. The divine touched him, his spirit was refreshed and he was sent back down to get on with his work. It was tough work, but it couldn't be done on the mountaintop. The mountain top experience, that lifts your spirits and warms your heart, is wonderful, but you can't stay there. You have to get on with the real work down in the valleys.

Peter didn't want to leave the mountain top. "Let's build some shelters and stay here!" he shouted. (If he'd had a cell phone, he would have wanted to take a selfie with Moses!) You do have to sympathize. Any of us might have done that. But before Peter had finished, he was interrupted. By God. Telling him to shut up and listen!

Sometimes you need to just listen. Just soak it up. Just be in the moment and let it touch you. Peter wasn't very good at that; and neither are we. Peter had already argued with Jesus, and would argue again and again before the end. Peter had his own ideas, and he was not good at listening. But Peter did come to understand in the end.

In a letter he wrote many years later, he referred back to this experience, and the wisdom that came to him later: just listen; watch for the messages that God sends you; take time to appreciate the mountain top moments and draw strength from them. Then get on with the work. We need to soak up our mountain top moments; let them feed our souls, and then we need to get back down in the trenches and get on with the messy reality of life.

Notice what Jesus said to Peter and John after the moment was over: "Get up and do not be afraid." There's no need to be afraid. The mountain top is still there, and you will see it again. No need to be afraid because God will be travelling every step of the journey with us. No need to be afraid because the day will come when we all get to say

“See, I was right! I knew it was him!”

Amen.