

Sermon, February 26, 2017
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Six days later it says in our scripture reading. Six days after Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Six days after Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." (Matthew 16:18. Six days after Jesus tells the disciples "that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Matthew 16:21) Six days after Jesus rebukes Peter saying, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me;" (Matthew 16:23) Six days after Jesus tells the disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

Six days later – after all this, Jesus invites three of the disciples to come with to pray. This was not an unusual request. Jesus often took time away from the crowds to pray and to recharge his batteries. Perhaps without much thought about what would happen next, Peter, James and John went with Jesus up the mountain to pray. While Jesus is praying something amazing, something inexplicable happens. Jesus' clothes become dazzling white and his face "shone like the sun." (Matthew 17:2) We don't know exactly what happened in that moment, but I'm guessing that Jesus comes face to face with the eternal and living God. And you cannot stand in God's presence and not be changed. Just ask Moses – he meets God and the people are so terrified that he must cover his face.

But it doesn't stop there. Moses and Elijah appear and they are talking with Jesus. Peter not knowing what to do or to say, says, "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." (Matthew 17:4) and with the words barely out of his mouth, something else happens. They are overshadowed, and a voice says, "This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)

Is it any wonder that the disciples fall to the ground shaking with fear? Who knows how long they stayed there. Jesus comes to them in their fear and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." (Matthew 17:8) As they are walking down the mountain Jesus says, "Tell no one about the vision until after the son of Man has been raised from the dead." (Matthew 17:9)

This story is pure mystery. I cannot explain how the improbable and impossible somehow become real. But this story – told in all three Gospels is our story of hope. Ever year, in the days leading up to Ash Wednesday, we tell this story of Jesus transfigured. Of Peter saying how good it is to be here. Of the commands "Listen. Get up. Don't be afraid because it is the heart of the Gospel message. In God's love, we are changed. By God's grace, we are all transformed. And there is no time more important to remember this, then before the season of encountering our mortality and deepening our relationship with God. During Lent, we make our own journey of drawing closer to God. And God drawing closer to us that we are transfigured. Changed.

A few years ago I watched a movie called “Salmon Fishing in the Yemom. What I loved about this movie is the journey from what is deemed improbable – maybe impossible – salmon rivers in the desert into a reality. It is about hope. The Sheik who wants a sustainable food supply and industry for his people. A woman lost in grief. A man closed to other possibility. By the end of the movie the impossible becomes possible and each character in their own way is looking at the world as full of hope and potential instead of dead ends.

The impossible becomes possible on Mountain top. God came close and changes Jesus. Strengthens him for crucifixion and death. Holy and mysterious moments give us what we need for the journey ahead. We all take with us God’s words of promise. Jesus is God’s beloved. Listen to him. And we are reminded that in our fear, it is Jesus who touches our shoulder gentle and says, “Get up. Don’t be afraid.”

Our fears are all different. Not two of us face the same challenges. David Loose in his column *In the Meantime* writes, “...the prospect of job loss, the potential to betray our national identity and values, the fading possibility of a better future for our children, dread illness, unexpected death, the list goes on. Fear is a part of the common fabric of our lives even though it manifests itself differently. And to all these different fears, the Gospel reply is the same: Because God is God of the past, present, and future, we need not fear. This is not the same as saying that we will have no problems, or that we will avoid all harm and hardship. Rather, it is recognizing that when we trust God for our individual and communal good and believe God is with us always, we need not fear.”

Perhaps you have your own story of God’s presence in your life. Holy moments when it seems that God is present in ways we cannot explain. Moments when God says “Get up. Don’t afraid. Perhaps you’ve been touched by God’s healing, helping, grace filled, loving, abiding presence. These are not the everyday experiences. They are brief moments of wonder and mystery that always seem to come at exactly the right time. And it is hard to find the words to describe it. Sometimes it is a dream that brings peace. Sometimes it is the feeling of not being alone. Sometimes it being surround by a warm light. Whatever and however it happens there’s a sense that God has come near and life is changed.

As we head into Lent, let that Gospel message “don’t be afraid” sustain you. Our beloved, Jesus, leads us not only up the mountain to the place of mystery, but into our daily living. Showing us always the pathway to new life and transformation. Amen.