First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

February 19, 2023

Blinded By The Light

Matthew 17:1-9 - NRSV

**The Transfiguration**

**17**Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. **2**And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. **3**Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. **4**Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I[a] will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” **5**While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved;[b] with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” **6**When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. **7**But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” **8**And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

**9**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.”

When I was a kid, I was obsessed with the Transformers. For any of you who may not know what the Transformers are, according to the toy maker Hasbro, “Transformers are living, human-like robots with the unique ability to turn into vehicles or beasts.” Pretty cool, if you ask me. To this day, when I visit my folks, I’ve been known to dig out my Transformer robots and invite my grandnephews and nieces into a time of play.

The popularity of the Transformers is pretty broad based, and over the years, the franchise has spawned cartoons, live-action movies along with enough merchandise which, if it were all purchased, would bankrupt a small country.

The desire to change into something other than who we are, is prevalent and pervasive in our modern-day culture. We are constantly bombarded with ads for fitness products, or diet plans. Buy our weight loss product, and lose all the weight you want, guaranteed! Your money back, if not 100% satisfied. Purchase our particular brand of, clothes, perfume, cosmetics, car, etc., etc., and your life will be transformed forever!

Somehow, I don’t think these are the types of transformations that the writer of Matthew’s Gospel was referring to, when these words were put to paper.

So, Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Sukkot, also known as the Festival of the Tabernacles. This is a harvest festival, which celebrates God’s bounty and commemorates God bringing the Israelites into the promised land. Part of the celebration involves building shelters, which folks live in during the seven days they are bringing in the harvest. Prior to the destruction of the second Temple, it also was one of the three major pilgrimage festivals where Jews were expected to travel to Jerusalem in order to properly celebrate the event. While they’re traveling, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain. Suddenly, Jesus is transformed, right before the disciple’s eyes! I love how the Message translates verse 2, which reads, *“His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light.”*

Can you imagine how scary it must have been to Peter, James and John, to witness such a thing? Then, to top it all off, Moses and Elijah show up and get into a conversation with Jesus! Yikes! I’m not sure how I would have reacted, if I had been present. But Peter tells Jesus that it’s great that they are there, and that they should to build shelters, or tents for all three. One commentary notes that Peter probably had the Sukkot festival in mind, when he proposed this, and that his motive for constructing the shelters was an attempt to keep Moses, Elijah and Jesus on that mountain for an extended period of time.

So, up to this point, Matthew, Mark and Luke record this event pretty much the same way, with slightly different focuses, because each version was written for different audiences. But here’s where it gets interesting. Peter, it seems, has crossed a line. Verse 5 and 6, of Matthew’s version, tells us what happens next: “***5****While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved;[b] with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”* ***6 “****When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.”*

Whoops! It looks like Peter is still focusing on the way things have always been, looking backwards instead of forward. He was, in effect, blinded by the light of the way things were, instead of the way things were going to be.

What God is doing here, is affirming Jesus’ ministry, once again. God is reminding the disciples that Jesus is the pivot point between the old covenant and the new life embodied in the message that God had sent Jesus to proclaim.

Of course, the disciples were frightened, and who wouldn’t be frightened if God, God’s own self, showed up to interrupt us and correct what we’re saying! Scary stuff, indeed. Verse 7, which only appears in Matthew’s version, tells us how Jesus reacts to the very real fear that his friends were experiencing, *“… Jesus came and touched them, saying, get up and do not be afraid.”*

So, ultimately, where does this leave us? Is the story of Jesus’ transfiguration just something we hear once a year and then forget about, until it shows up again in the Lectionary? Or is this an opportunity for us to think about how we might also be transformed?

When we become followers of Jesus; when we start applying the teachings of Jesus to our day to day lives, are we truly allowing ourselves to be transfigured? Do we really want to be changed from within? Of course, that’s what we all want, or at least that’s what we say we want.

The word “change” is a scary one, isn’t it? Change doesn’t come easy for many of us, myself included. Change means letting go of old ways of thinking, doing and being. It means leaving those old thoughts, words and actions behind and moving beyond our comfort zone. It means putting on our spiritual sunglasses in order not to be blinded by the light of fear and inertia.

Since it’s Black History month, I’ll share something with y’all that I seldom talk about. I was raised in a predominately white culture, with very little exposure to folks of Hispanic or African or Pacific Island descent. Casual racism was pretty much the norm, in my household, and the N-word was tossed around in daily conversations as if it were no big deal. I honestly didn’t think too much of it, at the time; it was what it was, and I though that’s how everyone else believed and acted.

It wasn’t until I moved to Seattle and began having interactions with more racial minorities, that I began to be changed from the inside. People who I had been taught were less than me, not equal or somehow less human than myself, all of a sudden became my neighbors, the barista at my favorite coffeehouse, fellow members of my church, and, ultimately, my friends. They were just like me, with the same ideals, the same goals, the same hopes and fears. In those sacred interactions, I was able to allow myself to be transformed.

Siblings, in Christ, it is so much easier to remain stuck in the old ways of speaking, doing and being. Inertia, and fear, are very comfortable places, for many of us, and they can prevent us from being God’s hands and feet in our world. It is much easier to say this is the way it’s always been done, or it is what it is, I can’t do anything about it, and then use those attitudes as an excuse to not move forward, an excuse not to change, either as individuals or congregations. It’s much easier to stay inside our comfort zones and not take risks. It’s so much easier to ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit, then it is to move beyond the little bubbles we create around ourselves and those people and things we love and actually do the work Christ calls us to do.

Fear is a powerful motivator to stay stuck in the old ways. What if we try something and we fail? What if other people laugh at us? What if that group of people who don’t look like us really are the lazy, mean, less than human person many of us grew up believing them to be? Fear of the other; fear of what letting go of our old attitudes might mean, ultimately becomes a poison that causes enormous harm to ourselves and those around us, preventing us from fully living into the teachings of the one we claim to follow. But, when we are overcome with fear, just as the disciples were on that mountaintop, when the fear of the unknown is so great that we are crippled and unable to move forward, remember Jesus’ reaction. He touches the disciples and tells them to get up and do not be afraid. And that’s the crux of it, right there. Change, and the fear of not knowing what the future holds, doesn’t have to paralyze us, if we remember that Jesus walks with us, even today.

This doesn’t mean that every single new thing we try will work out. And, it doesn’t mean many of our fears lack validity. But knowing that Jesus still walks with us, should give us the courage to lift our heads up and step out with confidence into places and situations that we otherwise might avoid.

Folks, your task this week is to grab your spiritual sunglasses and not let yourselves be blinded by the light of fear. Don’t let yourself be paralyzed by the unknown. Jesus walks with us, even today.

So, be open to being transfigured, transformed and changed from within. Be willing to do the work to step outside your comfort zone, be willing to do the work to open yourself up in order to be guided by the Holy Spirit, and above all, when the fear and inertia raise their heads, as they inevitably will, remember this: Jesus walks with you today, just as he did with his disciples, and there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of. AMEN