

**Looking for Jesus!**  
(Transfiguration Sunday)

February 23, 2020

UMCG

I was serving another church in the Conference when, at the last minute, I was asked to fill in for my Associate Pastor on a Sr. High mission trip out west to Arizona. Next thing you know I was driving through the Rocky Mountains with a van full of rambunctious teens and another adult team leader!

Finally...finally we pulled into the town of Teec Nos Pos, a small Navajo village just a stone's throw from Four Corners National Monument. We joined three United Methodist churches from California for a week, working on various projects on the Navajo reservation. Sierra Service Project (SSP) was the mission organization we were working with. Basically it's the western counter part to ASP.

On the third day or so, the staff organized a short trip in the late afternoon. We drove about a third of the way up the slopes of a nearby mountain. The goal? A time of spiritual meditation and reflection...alone...at a place of one's choosing. So, you can imagine a convoy of vans disgorging a host of teens and adults who scattered like ants into a virtual wilderness setting high above the valley floor. Off I went, wandering around until I found a cozy spot under a tree with some bushes around me. I settled into the task of meditation and prayer.

Do you know how hard that is? About five minutes in, I was thinking, "Now if I'm having a tough time doing this, what must our young people be going through?" Unlike Jesus's disciples, I didn't fall asleep. But truth be told, I spent most of my time either gazing across the valley at the sheer beauty of my surroundings, or searching in vain with the hope of spotting mule deer or elk. They just had to be there! The habitat was perfect!

Well, today we find ourselves hiking up "a mountain" towards evening with Jesus and three of his disciples...his inner circle...Peter, James and John. As darkness falls, suddenly, Jesus is "transfigured" right before their very eyes! We're told his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. As if this wasn't strange enough, suddenly two men, supposedly long dead, appear beside Jesus, talking to him—Moses and Elijah! Stunned, the disciples are speechless...all except Peter. Peter, as you know, is rarely speechless! Nervously, Peter pipes up and offers to build three tents—three booths—one each for Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

And then, right in the midst of Peter's rambling, a bright cloud surrounds them and from the cloud a voice proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased! Listen to him!" When the disciples hear this, they fall to the ground, terrified. As 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners, we need to ask "What's going on here?" What is this story all about? And where does it fit in Matthew's particular story of Jesus?

Well...let's think about this. Several weeks ago I mentioned we'd be preaching the revised common lectionary this year featuring Matthew's Gospel. As you recall, I stated that we really don't know who wrote Matthew's story of Jesus. Nor are we 100% sure of Matthew's audience—the community he wrote to. The scholarly consensus is that the author likely was, or had been, a Jewish Rabbi or leader of a synagogue. I also shared that Matthew was probably written between 80 – 90 CE, 20 years after the Roman armies brutally quelled a Jewish uprising in Palestine, flattening the capital city of Jerusalem and destroying its holy Temple in 70 CE.

This was a major catastrophe. A crisis of epic proportions. How could the Jewish faith survive without the temple, where there, alone, priests could offer up sacrifices to God? Where had their God gone whose literal abode was in the Holy of Holies deep inside the temple? Furthermore, only two out of many Jewish religious groups, or sects, survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Who were they? The Pharisees (who soon morphed into what is now Rabbinic Judaism), and another Jewish sect, Jewish followers of Jesus, who believed he was Israel's Messiah. And that was the point of friction between these two surviving Jewish religious groups: Was Jesus the Messiah or not? The Pharisees said "no" ...Jesus's followers said "yes."

Both groups fled Jerusalem for safety. Many took refuge in Galilee or further north. By the time Matthew was written, a sizeable population of Pharisees and Jesus followers were living in the city of Antioch, Syria, about 100 miles north of Jerusalem. What was going on between these two rival groups when Matthew was written? Schism! Separation! Matthew makes it clear...Jesus's followers were no longer attending synagogues for worship and study. They had been beaten and thrown out of the synagogues in Matthew's story of Jesus. In fact, the two sides bitterly opposed each other over a number of issues besides the question of Jesus's identity. Thus, most NT scholars believe Matthew was writing to a predominantly Jewish faith community that had already pulled away from the Pharisees, and were opening up their faith community to Gentiles.

Matthew is the most Jewish of all four Gospels. And the major reason Matthew was written was to help this new faith community establish a clear identity, a new identity. In fact, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, sent to liberate God's people. Our last three

sermons have been taken from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Just as Moses ascended Mt Sinai to receive the Torah, God's instruction, so too, in Matthew 5, Jesus ascends a mountain. Jesus, as the new Moses, teaches his disciples his version of Torah. Last week I shared how Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to extend and deepen it, and to internalize it. "You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder.' But I tell you, if you have anger toward another you have committed murder in your heart." To be more precise, last week's sermon showed how Jesus transcended both the Law and the Prophets (two major segments of the Hebrew Bible).

So...think with me. Think hard. Jesus, the new Moses, was on a mountain in Matthew 5, teaching that he had come to transcend both the Law and the Prophets. Hmm...Today we've skipped to Matthew 17. Once again, Jesus and several of his disciples have clamored up a mountain. And that evening he is transfigured before their very eyes! And who joins him? None other than Moses and Elijah! Did you know that in the Hebrew Bible, both Moses and Elijah were transfigured on mountain tops? More precisely, what does Moses represent? The Law! And Elijah? The Prophets! Wow!

So...what did today's seemingly strange story from Matthew 17 mean to his earliest audience...an audience that was composed predominantly of Jewish followers of Jesus? Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon on today's text, sums it up succinctly when she says, "In the present case, the most common message is that Moses stands for the Law, Elijah stands for the prophets, and Jesus, of course, is the Messiah. By singling Jesus out as 'my Son, the Beloved,' God sets the Gospel over the Law and the Prophets. Listen to *him*, says the voice from the clouds."

Today, the church calendar marks a transition. We are leaving the Season of Epiphany and entering the Season of Lent. Epiphany means "manifestation" or "revelation." In the field of religion an epiphany refers to a sudden manifestation or appearance of the sacred or divine, often accompanied by light and sound. The season of Epiphany is a time when Jesus is made manifest...when his true identity is revealed to his followers. Thus, the lectionary readings in Epiphany reveal Jesus's true self.

Epiphany starts with the Baptism of Jesus. Remember what happened then? As Jesus comes up out of the waters of the Jordan, suddenly the heavens open and God's Spirit descends as a dove, alighting on him. And a voice from heaven cries, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Today, the Season of Epiphany ends with Jesus's Transfiguration. High on a mountain, Jesus's face shines like the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white. And after he is joined by Moses and Elijah, again God's voice booms from a cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased . Listen to him!"

Do you know what I really love about today's scripture? It's the kindness, the tenderness Jesus displayed to his terrified disciples, lying on the ground in fear and trembling. Verses 7 and 8 tell us that "Jesus came to them...and touched them...saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself...alone!"

The Season of Lent begins this Wednesday...Ash Wednesday. Lent is a time of preparation when we walk together with the Lord, learning from him as we travel the long road to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die on a cross. Ultimately, the journey of Lent leads us to Jesus's resurrection, and the celebration of Easter.

So what will you be looking for this Lent? Will you simply pursue what you ordinarily pursue? Same old same old? Or will you be looking for Jesus? (Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you! Matthew 6:33) Why not join us this Wednesday at 7:30pm for a special service and imposition of ashes, right here in the sanctuary. All of us need to stop, and be reminded, that we are not going to get out of here alive physically. "From dust you have come...and to dust you shall return." Now that's sobering! With that in mind, how will you live your life going forward? Who will you be looking for this Lent? Why not look for Jesus?

And who will you be listening to this Lent? Why not take the advice from that voice in the cloud: Listen to him. Listen to Jesus! The one who still comes to us, his followers...in the midst of our fears, our anger, our loss and pain, in the midst of our loneliness and discouragement. In the midst of joys and sorrows. Why not open ourselves up to Jesus? Let him come to us, and gently touch us. Let him help us get up. Let him quell our fears! Indeed, as with those first disciples on that mountain top...Jesus remains—with us!

Amen.