

Enough to Go On
(Transfiguration Sunday)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

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."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Enough to Go On

How do you prepare for something you hope will never happen? For Peter and the disciples, the beginning of the end began six days before our story for this morning. Jesus asked the disciples who they believed he was, and Peter, in one of his shining moments, quickly responded, "You are the Christ, the Messiah." Unfortunately, Peter's shining glory didn't last long. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Jesus began to teach about how the Messiah, the Christ, must suffer and die. But that wasn't what Peter had envisioned; it wasn't what Peter meant when he called Jesus the Christ.

Peter wasn't interested in watching Jesus suffer and die, he hadn't signed up to be a disciple of a crucified Messiah. Peter was waiting for Jesus to defeat the Romans. He was waiting for Jesus to right the wrongs of the world and reignite a golden age. But when Peter took Jesus aside to clarify, to explain, Jesus called him Satan—loud enough for everyone to hear. It was, in many ways, the beginning of the end for Peter—a complete annihilation of his hopes and dreams for the future, for his family, for his people. It was, at the very least, the end of the beginning. The end of Peter's naïve belief that everything was going to end with trumpets and fanfare. The beginning of his understanding that the road ahead was not going to be an easy one and was not going to be without cost.

I wonder if any of you have experienced a similar moment of disillusionment tinged with despair this past year. Perhaps when the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 was re-invoked and planes carrying immigrants took off to El Salvador in defiance of a judge's orders. Or maybe when you first learned about Alligator Alcatraz and the abhorrent conditions we were housing people in without due process. Or maybe it was when Renee Good or Alex Pretti were killed, or when 5-year-old Liam was used as bait for his family and then flown to Texas to be incarcerated. For me—and I suspect for some of you—these weren't just news stories. They felt like the end of the beginning or at least the beginning of the end. The end of being able to believe that however bad things got, the guardrails would hold—that court orders would be followed, that children wouldn't be used as bait, that people wouldn't be detained without due process. The beginning of understanding that the road ahead of us is not going to be an easy one and is not going to be without cost.

Six days. Matthew is oddly specific about this. Six days after Peter's world came crashing down, Jesus took him, James, and John away, up a mountain, apart. Six days Peter sat with what Jesus had said—about suffering, about the cross, about everything Peter didn't want to be true. Matthew doesn't tell us what happened on the way up, what Jesus said, or whether the disciples even spoke. He simply tells us that Jesus took them up a high mountain, by themselves.

And there, on the mountaintop, something happened that defied every category they had for understanding the world: Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun. His clothes became dazzling white. And suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared, talking with him. And Peter, being Peter, tried to make it last. "Lord, it is good for us to be here. Let me build three dwellings..." Let's stay here. Let's build something around this glory so it doesn't slip away. It is the most human of responses.

But before Peter can finish speaking, a cloud descends. Not a gentle mist—an overshadowing. The same kind of cloud that covered Mount Sinai when God gave the law. The cloud that signaled, in Israel's memory, that God was dangerously, unmistakably present. And from the cloud, a voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him." And the disciples fall to the ground, overcome with fear.

We tend to imagine this scene as luminous and serene. But Matthew does not say the disciples were filled with light and peace; he says they were terrified. Not just startled. Not just overwhelmed by light. Terrified. Thrown to the ground in fear.

And the voice that speaks from the cloud does not relieve that terror. It doesn't say, "Don't worry, this will all make sense soon," or "Just wait, it's going to be great once we get there." It simply says, "This is my Son. Listen to him." Listen to him. Listen to the one who said that the Messiah must suffer. Listen to the one who said he must be handed over and killed. The one who has been describing a road none of the disciples want to walk. Listen to him. He is my Son, the Beloved.

And then suddenly Jesus is with them. He does not stand above them and demand courage. He comes near, touches them, and says, "Get up, and do not be afraid." Not "don't be afraid because there's nothing to fear." There is plenty to fear. The road to Jerusalem hasn't changed. The cross hasn't been canceled. The suffering Jesus predicted is still coming. "Do not be afraid" is not a reassurance that everything will be fine; it is an invitation to get up anyway.

And it is not an easy invitation. Because getting up doesn't make the fear disappear; it means we have to move with it, in spite of it. It means we begin preparing for what we hope will never come. It means asking what faithfulness will require when ICE shows up in our community—not because we want to, but because love does not look away when neighbors are vulnerable. It means thinking ahead, being ready to stand when standing may be costly. And all of this—the planning, the conversations, the wondering—happens while we are afraid. Afraid for people we know. Afraid for our nation. Afraid of what it is going to cost to do the right thing. And the Transfiguration, unfortunately, does not take that fear away. It does something else instead. It places our fear inside a much larger, longer story. Because it wasn't just Jesus and the disciples up on that mountain; Moses and Elijah were there as well. Moses—who stood before Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler in the ancient world, and demanded that he release an enslaved people. Elijah—who stood alone against a king and queen when they used the full power of the state to replace the worship of God with the worship of an idol. And Jesus—who was about to head to Jerusalem and hand himself over to be crucified.

Three figures who knew something about the challenge and cost of standing up to empire, of following God when the state follows a different path.

Moses and Elijah do not appear on the mountain as decoration. They appear because they are witnesses—witnesses that the story of God's people has always involved standing before powers that seem too great to resist, walking roads that seem too long to travel, and trusting a God whose purposes are not always visible in the moment.

The Transfiguration does not remove fear. It insists that the story of walking hard roads, of speaking truth to power, of laying one's life on the line for the sake of others is not a story that begins with us. We are not the first to walk a road we did not choose toward a future we cannot see. Moses walked this road. Elijah walked this road. Jesus walked this road. And in our own time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer walked this road when he refused to let the Third Reich define what the gospel meant. And Fannie Lou Hamer walked this road when she and countless others decided that loving their neighbors meant being willing to stand in the face of firehoses and dogs, to put their lives on the line to march for justice. And Desmond Tutu walked this road in South Africa, standing against state-sanctioned apartheid and insisting that all people are made in the image of God. And the God who sustained their faithfulness is the same God who led an enslaved people to freedom, who kept faith with a prophet in the wilderness, who raised a crucified man from the dead. Who reminds us that this story is longer than any one chapter of it.

When the disciples looked up, Matthew tells us, they saw just Jesus. Moses and Elijah were gone. The cloud had lifted. The dazzling light had faded. There was just Jesus—the same Jesus who had told them about the suffering to come, the same Jesus who would walk with them to Jerusalem, the same Jesus who would hand himself over to be killed. Just Jesus. And it was enough.

Not enough to understand. Not enough to see the whole road ahead. But enough. Enough to take the next step. Enough to stay faithful when faith came with a cost. The Transfiguration doesn't end with a plan. It ends with a descent—a walk back down the mountain, into a world that hasn't changed, carrying what they've seen but cannot yet understand.

The disciples walk back down into the valley, where Matthew tells us that a father is waiting with a sick child the other disciples couldn't heal. They walk toward Jerusalem, where everything Jesus warned them about will come to pass. They step into a future that is still uncertain, still risky, still unresolved knowing there is no going back to the way things were before.

There are moments like that in every life of faith—moments when two roads diverge, and we have to choose without knowing what the road will cost. The Transfiguration doesn't give us a map, but it gives us something to go on: a glimpse of glory that steadies us for the valley, a voice that says "listen," a hand that reaches down and says, "get up. Do not be afraid", and witnesses who remind us that we are not the first to walk this path.

It is enough.

Enough to go on.

Thanks be to God.

Invitation to the Offering

Each week we set aside time to remember that everything we have—our time, our resources, our courage—is a gift from God. God gives us enough to go on, enough to take the next faithful step. So let us consider how we might offer back what we have been given for the work ahead.

Benediction

Go in grace knowing that we are not the first to face hard roads with steep costs.
And may the love of God,
the peace of Christ,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
go with you this day and always.
Amen.