

Sermon: What Our Eyes are Telling Us

Year A, Transfiguration

[Exodus 24:12-18](#); [Psalm 2](#); [2 Peter 1:16-21](#); [Matthew 17:1-9](#)

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We look out into the world and our eyes are telling us that things are falling apart. The institutions that drive our political and civic life are not able to contain the forces that are driving them. The divisions between citizen and alien are becoming blurred. The faith of our parents is playing less and less of a role in daily living. The respect for the written rules by which we have agreed to live our lives is faltering. There are people out there making outrageous statements, provocative claims. We are mocked for believing that Jesus Christ will return. Or at least that is what our eyes were telling us 1,700 years ago when the second letter of Peter was written.

We look out into the world and our eyes are telling us that things are coming together. Where once we lived very private isolated lives, we are realizing that there are others out there who agree with us. Maybe not everyone, but we're being surprised more and more often how many people from different walks of life agree with how we see the world. We are realizing that someone doesn't have to be an elite to have life experience and skills worth learning from. We can learn from each other and challenge the elites to better represent the world. Or at least that is what our eyes were telling us 1,900 years ago when the Gospel of Matthew was written.

We look out into the world and our eyes are telling us that things never change. Faith in Jesus Christ survives whatever the world throws at it, no matter how brutal or how belittling. Small communities have small churches, and they ebb and flow. Within living memory this church had five people attending Sunday worship with a supply minister showing up for an hour or so a week to preach a sermon. So long as we keep doing what we're doing, we'll be fine. Or at least that is what our eyes were telling us a month ago when we had our Annual Meeting.

The two Scripture readings today really center on the importance of vision in the life of faith. The second letter of Peter was written about 300 years into the life of the Christian church. It was one of the last books to make it into the Christian canon, and frankly, it almost didn't make it. It beat out other far more popular and widely read books. No one can say why this letter made it in and others did not, but because it made it in, we recognize a struggle we're having today as something that has been going on since the beginning of the Christian church.

Jesus said he would return and we would know it when he did. And we're still waiting. Back when 2 Peter was written, there were people going around to Christian communities telling them not to be so naïve, not to be so simple as to believe that Jesus was coming back. They needed to put their trust in things that endured, things that were real, things that the newcomers would show them in great and glorious detail if the community would only follow them. So the author of 2 Peter, perhaps out of rage or exasperation at how easily the communities were swayed pointed to the transfiguration story.

The story is similar in the three Gospels where it's recounted. Only John doesn't have an account of it. Jesus and three of his closest disciples go up on a mountain top. While there they meet Moses and Elijah and then suddenly encounter God. God affirms that Jesus is God's son. The disciples are frightened and don't know what to make of the experience. The disciples and Jesus go back down the mountain and daily life.

For many, that mountain top moment is one which points to the Resurrection. In that moment, Jesus is revealed as more than a man, but also divine, which is why it's one of the last readings we get during Epiphany, that time in the church calendar when we look more closely for God's presence among us. The disciples don't know what to make of the event until after the Resurrection, when they realize that they had seen Jesus as divine in that moment.

But for the author of 2 Peter, believing that Jesus will come again is absolutely fundamental to understanding Jesus' message at all. He hears the heretics who are leading the Christian communities astray saying that the communities have to be grounded in reality, not in a lovely fairy tale of God coming back to make things right. For those communities, he has a simple question. "What is more grounded in reality than the Laws and the Prophets? What is more real than God appearing to humanity and saying, "This is my Son, listen to him."?"

He reminds these ancient Christian churches *You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.* (2 Peter 1:19). Note the order, first there is darkness, then the day dawns, then the morning star rises. That's not how it works in reality. The morning star always precedes the dawn.¹ He's taking things out of order, so the communities can realize how out of order they are taking things. The Prophets and the Laws are the light in the darkness, the Resurrection is the morning star that precedes the dawning day, the Second Coming. He's reminding them that a con man always builds on a kernel of truth. He's telling them to keep their eyes on the truth, not on the con man.

Matthew faces a different problem. He's writing at an earlier time when what will become the Christian church is separating from the Jewish community. It is painful and heartbreaking for both sides. The Jesus that Matthew describes simply doesn't fit with the image of the Messiah that the Israelite community has been waiting for. He's so human. The author of 2 Peter is dealing with folks saying, "yeah, yeah, the Second Coming. We'll know it when we see it. And we ain't seen it yet." Matthew is dealing with people saying, "Dude, if Jesus were the Messiah, we would have known. We've had thousands of years to get ready for the Messiah, we would not have missed it."

To some degree you can see their point. God has such power. God created the world from nothing. Took clay and breathed life into it. Set up a world where six days labor yields seven days sustenance and then reminded us all that we had to keep Sabbath to remember that. Think about facing raw power, like Niagara Falls, or a winter storm at sea, or a two year old who has missed her nap. We recognize raw power when we see it on an earthly scale. We certainly would recognize the sheer magnitude of God's power unleashed on this earth.

Matthew is describing Jesus in terms of power. Jesus is glowing, his clothes suddenly brilliant white, conversing with Moses and Elijah like he did it every day (Matthew 17:2-3). A voice from the clouds says Jesus is God's beloved Son, with whom God is well pleased (Matthew 17:5). God's glory, power and majesty are unsurpassable, and they are surpassed by God's willingness to shed them all so we can finally recognize God's love and gentleness.² The

¹ Albert E. Barnett, "The Second Epistles of Peter: Exegesis," in vol. 12 of *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1957), 185.

² Patrick J. Willson, "Proper 12, Homiletical Perspective, Matthew 17:1-9" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 457.

measureless power that made the heaven and earth can be deftly contained in a hand³ reaching out to touch our shoulder and murmur, “Be not afraid.” (Matthew 17:7).

On that mountain top, the disciples have seen an affirmation of Jesus’ divinity.⁴ That’s an incredible gift. But they have also seen that God wanted to give them that gift, that moment of light when God shone on them when they humbly entered a holy space. When they leave the mountain, Jesus and his disciples will begin their journey to Jerusalem, begin their journey to the Cross.

What the disciples’ eyes tell them, although they will not realize it until later, is that they have learned how to see God’s light in the chaos to come⁵: the wild hosanna’s when Jesus enters Jerusalem, the aching longing for another path in Gethsemane, the betrayal by one of their dearest companions, their own flight into denial when Jesus is taken from them. The resurrection will come and they will understand this moment on the mountain top very differently than they do at the foot of the Cross. God will be with them as they do the hard work of the early church.

There is nothing they can do to keep themselves from the pain and heartache that is waiting for them in Jerusalem. Nothing. There is nothing they can do to keep themselves from the suffering of real life once they leave the mountain top. But, then, there is nothing they can do to keep themselves from God’s light which sheds hope on them in their darkest moment. Nothing.⁶ That’s the paradoxical message of the Transfiguration. God will do anything to convey God’s love for us, even lay aside infinite power to lay a hand on our shoulder and whisper in our ear. There is nothing we can do to escape suffering; there is nothing we can do to escape God’s hope.

The focus of the Transfiguration is how Jesus is transformed. So it’s easy to miss how the disciples were transformed too. They didn’t glow or have their clothes turn white. When one of them tried to say something, dear Simon Peter, always putting his foot in his mouth, God interrupted him. But they were different when they came down the mountain from when they went up.

When we met at Annual meeting at the end of January, we said we wanted to build on our strengths and reach out through Christian education to families with kids under 8. There’s a committee that’s meeting to put together a whole slate of activities for the weeks after Easter so that the folks who come on Easter might see themselves here more than one or twice a year. Please support them in their work and contribute any and all ideas you have.

Each of the church committees is looking at what they’re doing to see how it could be adjusted to better serve the existing church community and those families with kids under 8. Please support them in their work and contribute any and all ideas you have.

If you look around, you see some pretty interesting people, doing some pretty interesting things. Their share in this community is part of what makes them and their activities interesting. Their lives have been changed by God’s hand on their shoulder, God’s light in their lives. You know

³ Willson, 457.

⁴ Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz, “Proper 12, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 17:1-9” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 454.

⁵ Anschutz, 454.

⁶ Anschutz, 456.

that. You're pretty interesting yourself. And, as an interesting kind of human, you know others who are interesting too, who don't come to this church. Our next Bring a Friend to Church will be March 12, the second Sunday in Lent. We'll have a service similar to the last time, nice music, good coffee hour, traditional format, with plenty of color commentary for folks who haven't been to church in a while. Who would you like us to meet? Who do you know who could help us feel God's hand on our shoulder, hear God's whisper in our ear? We'd love to meet them.

God transfigures this world through people. God's light comes into this world through people. That transfiguration doesn't happen the way we humans expect. But when we believe what our eyes are telling us, we see God's light breaking through all the chaos, bringing hope in the darkest moment. Everyone would love to catch a sight of that.