

Becoming Holy

The Transfiguration and our fear of weird

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Matthew 17:1-9
February 26, 2017

There's a weirdness on that mountain.

If we've learned anything from our scripture, it might be to not go up mountains. Don't seek those mountaintop experiences. Don't do it. Weird stuff happens there.

There: anything. Bushes burn, laws given, messiah's transfigured, and voices come from nowhere to tell you stuff. Bright lights change our appearances and we get the silly idea that maybe God's got some wild ideas for us.

It's weird up there for James, Peter, John. They see things. Things the people down at the bottom wouldn't believe if they dared tell them. Lights and apparitions. The overwhelming sense that this Messiah they're following is the real deal. Not Elijah back from the dead. But his own man.

The joiner of the Law and the Prophets: their fulfillment.

You'd have done the same thing as Peter, I think. If you saw what he saw. Experienced what he did. You wouldn't know what to say. Or do. You'd say the wrong thing. Or get struck dumb like James and John. Smart enough to keep their mouths shut. Or too awestruck to speak.

After all, what is there to say?

Better not say anything at all. Not now. And not later, when you're with the rest of the twelve. Hold onto this one until all he said six days ago comes true.

Six days. Seems so long ago now. Up on the mountain. That was worlds away. Seems

meaningless from up here. Where we can see everything and everything we need to see is right here.

But something happened six days ago. Something we're trying to remember. It seems important now.

Six Days Ago.

It was a chapter ago, Matthew 16. The lectionary doesn't do us any favors now, jumping here without its context. Adding in clarifying words that don't actually clarify.

The Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus demanding a sign Jesus won't give. And he warns his followers about these leaders. How they value the wrong things. That's when he turns to them and asks about identity. His identity. What people say about him. What they think about him. Who is he?

Peter calls him Messiah. I imagine there's pride in his voice. Messiah. A word so pregnant with meaning we can't speak to it all. Not now. We'll deal with that later; when we tell this story again. We'll get plenty of chances.

But these aren't the last words. It doesn't end with Peter naming Jesus Messiah or commending Peter or telling them to tell no one.

It ends with foretelling of his death. With Peter jumping in, rebuking Jesus, and declaring the Messiah can't die. And Jesus condemns Peter, the rock of the Kin-dom, calling him Satan. And turning to his followers and telling them that the way

ahead is not victory, but death. Not rising high on horses with honor, but high on crosses with shame.

Up high, things get weird. Like the mountain, the cross. Six days pass. A lifetime, but not even a week.

Not even a week.

I always wondered why it was six days later. And while numbers meant more to the writers than they do to us, it seems oddly specific in a certain way. But not a clarifying way. Not in a "the following Tuesday" sort of way.

But six days is specific. And it evokes for me the only reference point that matters from Torah: the seventh day.

Is this the seventh day? Six days after, the seventh. The Sabbath.

On Sunday, the first day, he announces his death and on Saturday, the seventh day, the Sabbath, they walk up the mountain for an experience with the divine. Wow! And what a sight! That's some church that'll ruin it for those three disciples forever. What could top that mountaintop?

And the message becomes "we can't stay on the mountain forever." We can't stay in church, but come down again. After Sunday comes another Monday of work, commissioned to build the Kin-dom.

But what if the holy moment isn't the mountain? What if the Sabbath happened six days earlier? When Jesus spoke to them about his death and resurrection. About their having to live this out, following him to where he's going. Not to a king's throne, but a rebel's cross! What if that was church and this moment is the day before the next one. It's Friday for them, Saturday for us. What if the next Sabbath is not on the mountaintop, but at the bottom. When they have to face this journey to the cross?

Becoming Holy

We look in all these places for the holy, for the word and reference point that will

tell us what to believe and what to do. We demand of our faith a level of certainty it cannot give and a level of commitment to us we are unwilling to reciprocate.

That God will love us with every fiber of the cosmos and we can just say "ditto." But never having to say "I love you." Never having to face the obstacles or the challenge of standing against injustice or seeing the face of God in all our neighbors.

That we can come to church for our mountaintops without any of the weirdness. No lights or changed appearances or forms. No stone tablets or divine names. And certainly no crosses.

Church can function too easily as that place of transcendence without any transformation. Or too easy comfort without confronting the evil we existentially endorse. Like a church with only creeds and no confessions. Then communion with no commission.

But that's the thing about transfiguration. It isn't transformation, with a complete overhaul of our DNA to make us different. It only changes our appearance, not our substance. That blinding light makes the same into something different, like the bread and wine we will eat: both same and different. Like us, here, on level ground, staring up into the heavens, afraid of the weird; afraid of what that transfiguration means for us. Too afraid to become holy.