

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor John Swanson

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March 6, 2011 – Transfiguration Sunday

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — 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.”

SERMON

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The third year of seminary is called your internship year. It is a year spent working at a church with an ordained pastor doing much of what pastors do - preaching, teaching, visiting, leading worship, and attending meetings - you do most of what a pastor does, but you are not yet ordained. It is a year of hands-on learning, and if you are connected to the right pastor in the right setting, it can be a wonderful experience.

My internship year was spent in Westminster, Colorado - a northwestern suburb of Denver, Colorado and I was at Advent Lutheran Church. That year also happened to be my first year of marriage - so Beth and I, in many ways, enjoyed a year-long honeymoon in one of the most gorgeous, picturesque places in our country, outside of Wisconsin, of course.

My day off was Friday and, since Beth worked on Fridays, I usually found myself free to do whatever I wanted to do. So, on those days I often decided to get into my car and drive up into the Rocky Mountains. I remember going to places like Winter Park, Idaho Springs, Georgetown, and Breckenridge. A few times, during the winter months, I skied, but mostly I just drove up into the mountains until I saw a place I wanted to explore. Then I would just stop the car and get out.

On one occasion I remember seeing a mountain and thinking that it would be fun to climb to the top of it. So, I pulled into a parking lot and began hiking. Before I get too far into this story, I should explain that in Colorado, there are 58 mountains, or more accurately 58 peaks, that have an

elevation of at least 14,000 feet - these peaks are called 14ers. There are some climbers in Colorado who take great pride in attempting to climb as many of these peaks as they can. These are some hard-nosed, intense climbers. They are incredibly athletic, outdoorsy, lean, physically fit, love granola - these folks take their climbing very seriously.

This may come as a shock to you, but I was not one of those climbers. And this mountain that I had decided to climb was not nearly a 14er. In my defense, however, it was far more than a mound or even a hill. In fact, given my complete lack of any mountain climbing training, tools, supplies and experience, I think it was a fairly ambitious hike. But again, it was not even close to a 14er. To prove just how inexperienced I was - I began this hike not having told anyone of my plans and only bringing two items with me - a jacket and a water bottle.

It was about a 45 minute hike to the top of this mountain and when I got up there two things truly amazed me - the silence and the view. The view was spectacular - endless mountains in every direction. I wish I could remember the names of the mountains that I saw, but I cannot. They might have been Pikes Peak, Mount Elbert, Longs Peak, Mount Lincoln, Grays Peak, Mount Evans or some combination of them or others. Regardless, it was incredible!

Shortly after getting to the top, I drank some water and then I just sat down on a rock and looked. I enjoyed the silence and the overwhelming beauty. After a while I got up and began walking to the edge. And then, for the first time, I looked down, to see where I had come from. That is when reality hit me. I saw my car in the parking lot - and it looked so little, so tiny, like a little speck. I remember thinking, “John, what were you thinking climbing up this mountain - you are alone, you have no equipment and are afraid of heights.” Panic began to set in.

Before I got too carried away with panic, I began to pray. Praying, eventually led me to thoughts of the Transfiguration. I know that sounds rather pathetic and something only a pastor - or, I guess in my case at that time, an intern pastor - would think of when at the top of a mountain feeling anxious, but also amazed, but that is what I thought of.

I put myself in the shoes of the disciples and I wondered, as I was up on that mountaintop, what it must have been like for them - the hike up the mountain, Jesus glowing brightly, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the thunderous voice coming from the heavens. These were clear signs to the disciples that they were witnessing a heavenly event. Even though I had heard the Transfiguration story since my childhood, it wasn't until that

day that I really understood Peter's words, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings ..."

As my legs shook with fear and my eyes blazed with awe on the top of that mountain, I wondered if Peter's words may have been sparked by similar intense and diverging feelings. To be in the presence of something so spectacular, so other-worldly, would certainly be amazing (you could understand him wanting to stay), but I also think that it would be terrifying. After all, when we experience the presence of God that powerfully, it is not only his love and grace that is revealed, but also our sin and shame.

On the way down, Jesus told Peter, James and John not to tell anyone what they had seen until after he was raised from the dead. Isn't that a strange request? After seeing all that they had seen, Jesus tells them to keep quiet about it. Why? Why wouldn't Jesus want the disciples to share this amazing story with everyone that they possibly could?

To answer that question, we need to understand what happened on that mountain. The transfiguration provides the assurance that Jesus is the Messiah - the anointed one. The one who was sent by God to reveal God's love to the world. The transfiguration, ever so briefly, points us beyond this world to see the true and complete glory of Jesus the Christ.

I find it interesting that the next time that Peter, James and John are alone with Jesus, at least according to Matthew's Gospel, is in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is at that desperate hour, where Jesus cries out to God and asks if there is any other way to accomplish what needs to be accomplished, that we again see these three disciples connected with the Messiah.

At this point they are not on a beautiful mountain peak, but in the valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives, it is dark and the disciples can hardly stay awake. Here, these three disciples who witnessed Jesus' heavenly glory, now must witness his earthly agony. It is, as if to say, that if Jesus' followers wish to share in his glory, they must also be prepared to participate in his suffering. Perhaps Matthew intentionally connected these two events - the mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration and the valley experience in the Garden of Gethsemane - to suggest to the reader that the path of Jesus is paved with glory and pain.

After some time, I began my trek back down the mountain, and fortunately I made it back to my car safely. When I did, I remember looking back up and feeling great pride in what I had done. I found myself wishing that I had brought a camera with me so that I could reflect on what I had seen, but then I remembered the end of the Transfiguration story and Jesus' command not to tell anyone, and I kind of laughed and thought that it was somewhat appropriate that I had no proof of my adventure.

Peter, James and John must have thought about that brief, fleeting moment on the mountain quite a bit in the days after it had happened. But they did what Jesus had asked and waited to tell the story. They waited until everything was accomplished. The story of Jesus is not simply a story of his shining glory on the top of a mountain. It is also the story of his humble birth in a stable; it is the

story of his life as a servant; it is the story of his moments of teaching about God's love and mercy; it is the story of his eagerness to bring all people within the arms of God; it is the story of his suffering death on the cross; and it is the story of his resurrection three days later.

The story of Jesus and the power of Jesus come only when we bring all those pieces together into one complete picture. Then, and only then, are we conveying the Jesus that we dare to call our Savior and Lord. It is the Jesus who suffered terribly that we depend upon in our moments of despair, it is the one with the holes in his hands that we worship and glorify, it is the one who came to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus that we turn to when we are lost and alone and it is the one who appeared to Mary Magdalene outside of the tomb that we rely upon when our hearts are torn apart by grief and despair.

In just a few short days Lent begins. Lent is a somber time. It is a time of reflection and anticipation. A time to ponder our place in the story of the Christian faith. To ask, where do we fit in? What can we do after all that God has done for us? Lent is a time to think again about how we react and interact with the world around us and decide how we might need to change to be more in-line with the way of our Lord.

It is appropriate that the Transfiguration is the final Sunday of Epiphany and is thus so directly connected to Lent in the Church calendar year - in a strange way they need one another. In the Transfiguration we see the mountaintop glory of our Lord, the limitless power of our God. But before we get too carried away with all that splendor, we come to Lent and we hit the harsh reality of real life. Together we get the extreme aspects of our faith and the extreme experiences of our Lord.

This Jesus, who appeared in glory on a mountain and who appeared in agony on a cross, is the one that we follow. These two aspects of Jesus are vastly different, yet together they remind us that our work as his disciples includes moments of sadness, moments of joy, moments of grief, moments of wonder, moments of anguish and moments of glory. As Jesus' disciples we are called upon to follow wherever he leads us. That following may take us to brilliant mountain peaks or it may take us to dark valley floors. Either way, we know we walk with the Savior of all. Amen. © 2011