

The Transfiguration of the Lord
February 26, 2017
Matthew 17: 1-9
Havana, Florida
Preached at First Presbyterian Church,
Havana, Florida

Until the Day Dawns

There's a sign on the front door of the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church. It says, more or less, that if you'd like to see what's inside or have a go at the Taylor and Boody organ, just pop down to the church office and get the key.

Not so long ago, I was coming up the steps with a visiting minister. We were about to conduct a memorial service. Solemn though the occasion, my colleague took one look at that sign and laughed out loud.

"You'd never see a sign like that at my church," he said. "Our organist takes a somewhat different approach. In my church the sign would read, "Touch the organ inside this sanctuary, and you're dead meat."

There's something right about the way we do it in Tallahassee – something generous and hospitable and, dare I say, gospel-like about saying to total strangers, "Walk up the hill and go on in. Here's a key. Makes some music. Pray a while. Stay as long as you like."

A young man came into the church office recently. He spoke only Spanish. I thought it might be food or money that he wanted, but it wasn't. I knew he was saying something about "church" and "door," but I couldn't make it out. So I called up a church member who speaks Spanish and, over the phone, we figured it out. He just wanted to go inside the church to pray.

I like the idea of the church being a safe place to pray, but if this morning's Gospel reading is any indication, we'd better not assume that prayer will keep us safe. According to Mathew (and for that matter, Mark and Luke), prayer can get you into terrible trouble.

Six days after Jesus had told his disciples that he would be going to Jerusalem, he took Peter, James, and John on a hike up a “**high mountain.**” Looking back on it, that should have been the disciple’s first clue. In the Bible, scary things happen on the tops of high mountains.

Ask Moses. He and Joshua went up Mt. Sinai and stayed there for six days, enveloped in a cloud. Then the Lord himself called to Moses out of the cloud, and Moses ended up staying up there 40 days and 40 nights, with the glory of God shining “**like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain**” (Exodus 24:17).

The people of Israel were camped at the foot of the mountain while all this was happening. They looked up at that mountain, and saw all that fire and cloud, and decided that worshipping the Lord God wasn’t such a good idea after all. Too dangerous.

“I know,” someone said. “Let’s be spiritual without being religious. That should be a lot safer.”

“Good idea,” the people responded. “When Moses gets down – if he ever does get down – we’ll tell him we’ve changed our minds.”

Stay off of mountaintops, brothers and sisters. They can be holy terror.

That’s exactly what that hike up the mountain turned out to be for Peter, James, and John – a holy terror. Just as they got to the top, Jesus “**was transfigured before them.**” His face shone like the sun, “**his clothes became dazzling white,**” and all of a sudden, two figures appeared -- none other than Moses, the great lawgiver and Elijah, the great prophet.

Peter blurts out something about building three booths or tabernacles. (Peter is famous for having the right motives and saying the wrong things.) But while he’s still babbling, a bright cloud overshadows all six of them and a voice from the cloud says, “**This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased;** (just shut up and) **listen to him.**”

That did it. The disciples drop to ground, Matthew says, and are “**overcome with fear.**”

In the film noir classic *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond is an aging silent-film star with her pride fully inflated but her glory days well behind her. Early in the movie, a man driving by Norma's crumbling mansion has a flat tire, and he knocks on her door seeking help. When Norma appears, the man's eyes widen with surprise.

"You're Norma Desmond!" he says, astonished. "You used to be in silent pictures. You used to be *big!*"

Norma raises herself to her full height. "I *am* big," she says . . . "It's the *pictures* that got small."¹

Has God gotten smaller since Peter, James, and John, met God on that mountain? Or has our concept of God shrunk? If God is still big, why is our worship becoming so small?

Coffee-klatch worship, with preachers in sweatshirts and folks sipping lattes might seem safe and inviting, but suppose we were to encounter the living God in worship. The fuses would blow on the electric guitars. The coffee mugs would crash to the floor.

Would we then fall on our knees and tremble like these three on the top of that mountain? Or would we crawl toward the door to get away from the God who is *still big* – bigger than our cozy accommodations, bigger than our limited imagination, bigger than our meager expectations.

Annie Dillard calls liturgy "certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed."

Forget cut-off jeans and even coats and ties. Forget vestments. The appropriate attire for worship should be flak jackets and crash helmets.

Peter, James, and John get this message. You take a risk when you go to the top of a mountain to be with the living God, and you take an even bigger risk hanging around with Jesus. He is God's own beloved Son, and if we could manage to shut up and just listen to him, we'd find ourselves in a heap of trouble.

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Expect a Whirlwind," *Christian Century*, February 22, 2011

Do you remember what happens next in this story? Jesus leaves the company of Moses and Elijah, comes over to the disciples and touches them. **“Get up and do not be afraid,”** he says.

Literally he says, *Be raised*. **Be raised and do not be afraid.** You could even translate, **“Be resurrected and do not be afraid.”**

The appropriate response to the God of the Bible, the God who speaks from the cloud, the God who is *big*, is fear. Yet the word that usually comes from this same God is “Fear not!”

Don’t be afraid. The God who is big makes certain accommodations for our smallness. In the person of Jesus, God reaches out to us. God touches us, and (wonder of wonders) we are not killed. Instead we are raised up. We are resurrected. **“Get up and do not be afraid.”**

Of course the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is not the whole of the Jesus story. It’s more or less the hinge between the events that take place up north in Galilee and the events that take place down south in Jerusalem. Jesus tells the disciples, **“Get up and do not be afraid,”** but then he leads them to Jerusalem, where there will be plenty to fear.

The religious authorities to start with. They won’t like what Jesus has to say. Neither will Pilate, the Roman governor. Neither will the disciples themselves. There is much they will not understand until Jesus himself is raised from the dead.

“Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead,” Jesus tells the disciples on their way down the mountain. *Keep this under your hat for now. Who’d believe you, anyway?*

Reflecting on this experience, the writer of 2 Peter refers to that time on the mountain as **“a lamp shining in a dark place.”** Keep the story of what happened on that mountain in mind, he tells his readers, **“until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”** (2 Peter 1:19).

No one knows with certainty what this story of the transfiguration means, but it’s clear those first Christians loved it enough to keep telling it over and over. Most scholars think this story was well established in the oral tradition by the time

Matthew, Mark, and Luke sat down to write their Gospels. For that reason, it comes up in the lectionary every year as the hinge between Ordinary Time and Lent.

I used to dread preaching on this story, precisely because it's fundamentally undecipherable. Over the years, however, I have come to love it precisely because I can't comprehend it.

We can discern enough from it to fear God, and enough to hear Jesus say "Fear not." The rest is shrouded in a cloud on a mountaintop.

Maybe something similar to what happened to Peter, James, and John has happened to you. Maybe you have met the living God as well. It might have been on the top of a mountain (unlikely in North Florida.) Or it might have been at the beach, or at the lake, or even in church sipping a latte (which is even more unlikely.)

However it took place, I hope you have come to cherish that experience. I hope that, even if you can't comprehend it, it is for you **"a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart."**

Let us keep the memory of Jesus shining like the sun as we follow him to Jerusalem. We will need it in that dark place to which we are going, this side of resurrection.