

Sunday, February 19, 2023
Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

Matthew 17.1-9

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/595263345852466>

(Sermon begins at about 20:25)

“Collapsing of Space and Time”

As we approach the end of this season after Epiphany and prepare to begin our Lenten journey, we have the familiar story of Jesus’ Transfiguration. A divinely choreographed collapsing of space and time that almost seems to spring from the mind of a science fiction writer. An event containing imagery and symbolism that could form the foundation for a fantastical journey through space and time. Which, when you think about it, it succeeds in doing. In ways beyond what three of the characters, Peter, James, and John, could possibly imagine. In ways that form the foundation, not of a sci-fi novel or movie, but form the foundation of our Christian faith.

To set the stage, six days before, Jesus was in Caesarea Philippi with his disciples. It was there that everything changed—for Jesus and for his followers. Jesus starts by asking his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples start throwing out various responses: “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Jesus then asks them, “But who do you say that I am?” To which Simon Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus goes on to confirm that Peter is correct in his assessment and that Peter will be the rock on which he will build his church. But then comes the plot twist. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah. But that does not mean what they think it means. He is not the warrior king in the model of King David who will liberate the people. Well, he will liberate the people, but not in the way they think. But that’s another story we have to wait seven weeks to hear. Jesus drops what must have been incredibly gut-wrenching news, the real clincher. What him being the Messiah really means. As Matthew tells us, “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” The disciples must have been reeling. Their heads spinning with the contradictory messages they were getting. Jesus is the Messiah, the one who will liberate the people. But he will be killed. Impossible! How can that even be? That’s not how the story is supposed to go. And as if that isn’t confusing enough, Jesus is talking about being raised. What does that even mean? Sure, it sounds promising. But nothing like that has ever happened before.

This is the background for what happens today on the Mount of the Transfiguration. As we are told, six days later, Jesus goes up a mountain, taking with him his chief lieutenants: Peter, James, and John. Whose minds are probably still spinning from the conflicting and confusing messages from the previous week. They probably thought they were going to have some time away to recharge. After all, Jesus frequently did that. Went away to a deserted place, often to secluded mountain settings, to pray and gain some perspective. But noooo! Not this time. Little did they know the news Jesus delivered six days ago was nothing compared to what they would witness on that mountain. Things were about to become even stranger and more confusing.

They were about to witness things no one ever had before. Things that, at least in the moment, would only add to the mystery of who Jesus is and what would happen to him. And yet, in due course, would make perfect sense.

As we are told, Jesus was transfigured, with his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming dazzling white. Pretty strange stuff. But then it gets even stranger. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus.

Moses, the one who, on another mountaintop, on Mount Sinai, received the Law from God and gave it to the people. The Law that cemented the covenant between God and his people. Moses, being the one who led the Hebrew people out of slavery to the Promised Land. Just as Jesus will lead his people out of slavery to sin and death to the promise of forgiveness and new and eternal life.

Elijah, one of, if not the most, prominent of the Jewish prophets, who had his own profound “mountaintop experience” of God on Mount Horeb. The prophet whose return, many Jews believed, would signal the end of the age. Just as we anticipate Jesus’ return to signal the end of the ages.

Together, Moses and Elijah representing “the law and the prophets.” A term used to connote the entirety of scripture. The term Jesus had previously used in reference to himself in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” A visual representation, here, in this place, with Moses and Elijah representing the law and the prophets of which Jesus himself is the fulfillment. That fulfillment itself being symbolized and realized in this meeting on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

Consider the scene: Jesus being transfigured in dazzling white and the presence of Moses and Elijah, coming together in one space and at one time. This was nothing short of a convergence, of a collapsing, of time. The entirety of salvation history—past, present, and future—being collapsed into this one moment. Moses, the lawgiver, having died some 1,300 years before. Elijah, the most prestigious of the prophets, who according to scripture did not die but was lifted up into heaven some 900 years before. Their presence reaching from the past into the present moment with Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration. A moment that, with the dazzling white display of Jesus’ transfiguration, foreshadows what is to come. The dazzling white, otherworldly appearance of Jesus calling to mind the dazzling white appearance of the angel at the empty tomb, heralding Jesus’ resurrection. Here at this time and in this place providing an image that transcends time, coming together not just on this mountain, but providing a glimpse of God’s realm that are home to all three. A realm that will be opened to all of us through the events Jesus prepares for even now—his death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

I can’t even begin to imagine what was going through the minds of Peter, James, and John, as they watched all of this unfold. Certainly they would have grasped something of the significance of what was transpiring before their very eyes. What Jesus had told them six days before would start to make sense, would help them begin to understand at least something of what they were witnessing today. Although certainly not all, since some if it would not make sense until

Jerusalem. And some probably would not make sense even then. Surely, in the moment, their minds were racing, all a muddle, trying to sort it all out.

So, what do they do? What many of us do when we can't sort things out. Just do something. Stay busy. At least that way it feels like some progress is being made. Even if not particularly helpful. "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.'" Maybe if they built dwellings in an attempt to slow things down and to hold on to the moment, things just might begin to make sense. But that was not what was needed. They were not meant to just stay on the mountaintop and bask in the mystery that had been revealed to them. Their job was to go back down the mountain, to continue their journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. To witness Jesus' final days, when moment-by-moment, more would be revealed. As they witness Jesus' death. As they experience the resurrected Lord. As they themselves are transformed, transfigured, into who God needed them to be to carry on Jesus' mission and ministry, post-resurrection. A mission and ministry that would take on a far greater significance than what they had done, what they had experienced, up until now. A future that God commissioned them for when "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!'"

Time is short. There is no time to waste. They are to listen to all that Jesus has to teach them. They are to witness all that he does. Because all of this will prepare them to build the Church that will become the Body of Christ. All this will prepare them to guide that Body into the future. A future that was foreshadowed on that holy mountain. A future that includes each and every one of us, who share in the mystery and in the legacy of what happened on that mountain. A future that begins with Peter, James, and John making a journey down the mountain to the destiny that awaits them. To the transfigured future that awaits them and of which they will play crucial roles. To the transfigured future that leads, in the fullness of time, to this place and to this time, to you and to me.

In just a few days time—on Ash Wednesday—we begin a journey of our own. We begin our journey through the season of Lent. A journey that, similar to the scene on the Mount of the Transfiguration, is a convergence, a collapsing, of space and time. In our Lenten journey, we travel with Jesus and his disciples down the mountain and begin the journey to Jerusalem. We walk with them step-by-step, as Jesus moves closer and closer to what awaits him there. With the disciples, we will witness Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We will witness his Passion. We will experience the joys and the sorrows of Maundy Thursday. We will witness the horrors of Good Friday. And we anticipate the indescribable joy of the Resurrection.

Even though 2,000 years have passed since Jesus and his disciples made their journey, we are part of that same journey in very real and tangible ways, thanks to the collapsing of space and time that only God can facilitate. Journeying with Jesus, and with Peter, James, and John, every step of the way. With each step providing the opportunity for greater clarity as to the meaning of what happened on that mountain we leave today, of what happens on the way to Jerusalem, and particularly what happens in Jerusalem. A journey in which we will be transfigured into who God is calling us to be. Preparing us to fulfil our own destiny in the ongoing journey of faith as members of the Body of Christ.