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February 17, 2023  
Matthew 17:1-9  
Transfiguration Sunday: Hidden Figures

Our scripture this morning, Transfiguration Sunday, is the traditional passage that prepares us for the season of Lent. Lent in turn prepares us for the journey to the cross and empty tomb, where we mark the death and resurrection of Christ, God's act of salvation love. To help turn our minds toward Lent, in our scripture for Transfiguration Sunday, Jesus foreshadows his death and resurrection.

Rebekah and I spend much time in our sermons and teaching talking about the context of the scripture – the history, the language, the culture of that era. As important – or maybe even more important – is our own context. We hear and read scripture in the context of our own lives, of the events of our families, our community and our world. More than any other Sunday since I have been standing in this pulpit here at PCO, I am keenly aware of the context in which we hear our scripture this morning. I am keenly aware that that music and decorations and feasting on pancakes may seem discordant with our raw emotions. And yet, I think our scripture this Sunday speaks to that discordance, the confusion, the fear, the not knowing when the next shoe will drop. So I invite you to hear these words of scripture, words you may have heard before with fresh ears, in the context of our current lived reality. Hear now these words from Matthew Chapter 17.

### **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 bright as light. 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 set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud 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 raised their eyes, 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." **This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!**

Transfiguration Sunday doesn't make too many people's short list of favorite holidays. When people think about what comes before the spiritual disciplines, the fasting, the intentionality of drawing closer to God during Lent, Transfiguration Sunday kind of gets the short end of the stick. After all Mardi Gras – Fat Tuesday – is the day of excess – the day preparing for Lent looks a bit different than Sunday morning. In the 10 years I lived in Louisiana I learned a lot

about the traditions and practices of the season of Mardi Gras (and it is a season in Louisiana – not just a day), everything from the King Cakes, which magically appear at the beginning of the season – the day after Epiphany to the significance of the colors of green and purple and gold (they represent faith, justice, and power) to the reason for masks. My favorite tradition, however, is the parades, held across multiple weekends– with floats and the throws of beads and stuffed animals and other trinkets, all being led by jazz marching bands.

That jazz music is the music of the parades, the music that leads us into Lent seems fitting to me. The heritage of jazz is the blues, spirituals, and gospel music which brought beauty out the hard realities of the African-American experience. Jazz is music born of emotion, of soulful pain and of incredible joy. Jazz celebrates that disparate instruments and voices, each bringing their distinctive essence, can be woven together into a communal experience of beauty. Jazz cannot be separated from its African-American roots. As Grammy-winning jazz trumpeter Terence Blanchard reminds us, “What makes [jazz] African American to me is the pain and suffering, the honesty about our search for truth.”<sup>1</sup>

And this is where we find ourselves on this Transfiguration Sunday. Sitting in our pain and suffering and struggling to understand the truth of the world in which we live. Struggling to find joy amidst the pain, and yet knowing the power of communal rituals to be a healing presence in our lives.

Hidden in the traditions and rituals and the fun of the Mardi Gras parades is a foreshadowing of the parade that leads to the cross – the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – palm branches waving. The adoration of the humble Jesus entering Jerusalem on the donkey becomes the mocking and death of Christ the King. Jesus knows that this turn of events requires some preparation, for the ending is not what it seems at first glance. The finality of death is transformed into the promise of new life. This new reality requires an expanded imagination – a new vision. So Jesus invites three of his disciples on a journey with him, a journey up a mountain, where they catch a glimpse of what lies ahead.

Imagine you are Peter or James or John... you have just climbed this high mountain with Jesus and before your eyes he was transfigured – Jesus had a complete change of appearance – from the man, dusty from the trek up the mountain into one whose face shone like the sun and whose clothes became as white as the light. And then Moses and Elijah appear, talking to Jesus. And if that was not enough to get your attention, from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Listen to him – you think to yourself. I have been listening to him. I've heard him teach about the Kingdom of God – a kingdom where the first shall be last and the last shall be first; where those on the outside – the women, the poor, the Samaritans, the tax collectors, the sinners

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<sup>1</sup> Eshaan Kothari. The Soul of Black Jazz. *The Riverdale Review*. March 31, 2022. <https://www.riverdalereview.com/home/2022/3/31/the-soul-of-black-jazz>

are invited to feast at the table. I have heard him say that whoever wants to be his disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. Could I ever imagine it would be this hard, this painful to be a follower of Christ?

Imagine you are Peter or James or John – men of faith – men who know the stories from the Torah about how God’s message is revealed. You know the story from Exodus: after Moses climbs Mt. Sinai a cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day God called to Moses out of the cloud and appeared like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain. The glory of the Lord was first hidden by cloud and then appeared like a devouring fire. You can catch a glimpse, but the figure of God is hidden.

So when Peter and James and John are on the mountain with Jesus and Jesus face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light and a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, Listen to him!” that hidden figure is now emerging in ways that you can’t comprehend. This man you have been following – he is the Son of God. He is divine. You want to understand who I am, God says – well look no further than in front of your face. You will see God – you will experience me through the love and sacrifice of my son, Jesus Christ. The gospel writer Matthew tells us: “When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” Jesus said. “Don’t be afraid.”

You can imagine why Peter and James and John were afraid – were down right terrified. What had been hidden from them is now in plain sight. Why is it that we struggle see what is hidden in plain sight? What blocks our view? For Peter and James and John, on a global level, it might have been their understanding of the law or their history or their cultural understandings that kept them from seeing God made flesh in Jesus Christ as he stood before them, telling them of his death and resurrection. But for each one them, I’m guessing there was a more personal reason. Doubt that they were not worthy enough or important enough or holy enough to encounter God. Fearful of the unknown and the danger that might lie ahead. Lack of imagination of how God might be revealed in their lives, might be revealed in a way that looks or sounds or is experienced differently than their expectations. For their lives to be transfigured and transformed the hidden figure that is God must become apparent – must become real.

Some of you might remember the movie “Hidden Figures” released in 2016. It told the story of the mathematical calculations that allowed John Glenn to be the first American to orbit the earth – the first American in space. While Glenn was the face of the mission, and his skills as a pilot and as an engineer were crucial to its success, it was the “hidden figures,” the mathematical calculations of the launch, reentry and landing trajectories that made the mission possible. But the title “Hidden Figures” had a double meaning. It also told the story of three African-American women at NASA’s Langley Research Center who made invaluable contributions. Katherine Johnson diligently and creatively calculates launches and landings

using her incredible skills in mathematical computations and analytic geometry. Dorothy Vaughan conquers the beast that is programming newly developed IBM computers. And Mary Jackson defies the odds to get engineering training and work on the Mercury capsule prototype.

These women (and scores of others) were “hidden figures.” Much of the NASA community where they worked doubted their skills, were fearful of what it would mean if a woman and a person of color had skills equal to or superior to their white male colleagues. They lacked the imagination to see the gifts that God had endowed in these women. We all fall victim to this “hidden figure” syndrome at times – failing to see God in front of us, failing to listen deeply for God’s voice. At least I know I do. I try to prepare myself, yet I am unprepared when the glory of Lord is revealed.

For Peter and James and John, the unveiling and revealing of Christ on that mountaintop, was a moment of preparation – a time to prepare them for dark days that lay ahead, of the unspeakable tragedy of the loss of the life of their teacher and friend; to prepare them for the confusion and anger and fear; their frustration over a governing and religious system that failed them; to prepare them for the grief – overwhelming grief and sadness that would grip their hearts and not let go. Friends, what Peter and James and John realized just a short time later was that nothing could really prepare them for the emotions that lay ahead. They would experience the deepest of valleys. And they would experience them together. The disciples gathered around the table and were fed by Christ. They gathered at the cross, in homes, in an upper room. They gathered together to share their grief and their fears and they gathered to share their hopes for a different world where Christ’s light is never extinguished, where death does not get the last word.

Nothing could completely prepare us for the events of the last few weeks – the events at East Lansing high school, Cornell Elementary School, Okemos High School, and the MSU Campus. Drills and training can prepare for the logistical response – an important response that saves lives. But like Peter and James and John, nothing could really prepare us for the emotions that lay ahead, as we experience the deepest of valleys. And like Peter and James and John, we too experience them together. We will gather around the table and be fed the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation. We gather at the cross, at a rock, at an empty tomb. We gather together to share our grief and our fears and we gather to share our hopes for a different world where Christ’s light is never extinguished, where death does not get the last word. May it be so. Join me prayer.