

## **Sermon on Matthew 17:1-11**

Lately, the twins have been very resistant to bedtime and often come into our room multiple times a night needing help with something – to go to the bathroom, to get a drink of water, to find a lost stuffie, to tell me something. Often, I'm still awake when they come in, though sometimes I fall asleep before they do. One night recently, I thought I had fallen asleep and my room was completely dark. All of a sudden, I was startled awake by this creepy little voice whispering, "It's a chipmunk ghost!" I couldn't see anything at first in the darkness, but as my eyes adjusted, I could more clearly see that someone was standing there, with her face an inch from mine. As my eyes (and mind) further adjusted to being abruptly woken from a deep sleep, I started to understand more clearly. It was one of my kids trying to tell me something. But I still didn't really know what was going on. I still couldn't really see her very clearly. What was she saying about ghosts? When I was first abruptly awoken, I was about startled to death. My heart was racing. I didn't know what was going on. But then, my eyes and mind adjusted so I could see and understand more clearly. I wasn't under threat, it was just Iggy wanting to tell me about an episode of Alvin and the Chipmunks cartoon where the chipmunks act like ghosts, and she had decided 11 pm at night was the time to come tell me about it. Once I could see, I wasn't afraid in the same way.

The transfiguration is a little bit like that. The disciples have been walking with Jesus. Eating with him. Listening to him. Arguing with him. And then suddenly, on that mountain, they see him differently. Their eyes adjust for a moment to be able to see more fully and understand what is going on. In that moment of transfiguration, the light doesn't make Jesus something new – instead, it reveals the one who has been there all along. And as they see Jesus transfigured, they are quite so afraid in the same way.

You see, the transfiguration was not some sort of detached, mountain-top experience. In Matthew's Gospel, it comes right after a pivotal moment where Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, and then Jesus starts talking about his suffering, death, and resurrection. But Peter is having none of that. Peter cannot possibly imagine having a suffering Messiah, a Messiah who isn't planning to go on as a strong political leader, taking back what was lost under the hand of Rome. So Jesus rebukes Peter and says instead that anyone who would come after him must take of their cross and follow him on a path that would ultimately lead to crucifixion – execution at the hands of empire.

Six days after this interchange, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. In Scripture, mountains are what are often referred to as "thin places," where heaven and earth meet. Sinai, Carmel, Zion are examples of such thin places. So this is not a sentimental mountaintop moment. It happens in the shadow of the cross. The disciples have just heard that following Jesus will lead to suffering, not power, and they are confused, afraid, and disoriented.

But then, in the transfiguring moment, their eyes begin to adjust, and they begin to understand in a new way.

On that mountain, they witness several things happening. They see Jesus' face shining like the sun, his clothes become dazzlingly white, Moses and Elijah appear with him, a bright cloud overshadows them, and a voice declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved. With him I am well-pleased. Listen to him."

This moment reveals several things. First, it reveals that Jesus is not merely a teacher. He is radiant with divine glory. The light isn't shining on him, like a heavenly spotlight. It is shining from him. He holds the divine light himself. This is God in the flesh. Moses and Elijah appear with him, indicating that Jesus stands in continuity with the Law and the Prophets. Moses represents the Torah, the Law, and Elijah represents the prophets. Their presence with Jesus declares that Jesus is a continuation and fulfilment of Israel's story. And then God's voice echoes the words God spoke at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the beloved." But this time he adds a command: "Listen to him!" Now it's not just about the disciples recognizing who Jesus is, it is a call to listen and follow.

So why does this matter? The transfiguration happens at a key point – Jesus reveals his glory before heading to Jerusalem, where he will go through suffering and death. Jerusalem is not going to be a good place. Everything will fall apart, and the disciples will need this vision of Jesus to carry them through his arrest, his flogging, and his crucifixion. They will need the light of the transfiguration when the sky goes dark and Jesus is placed in the tomb. They need the transfiguration so they can still see clearly in the midst of what will seem like the darkest night to them.

The mountain prepares them for the valley they are about to enter. The transfiguration tells them, "The suffering you are about to witness does not negate who Jesus is. The cross is the road to glory." The transfiguration reframes the cross – not as failure, but as faithfulness. The transfiguration reminds the disciples that the cross is not the end. They've been to the mountaintop!

And Peter, he's having a moment on this mountaintop. He's into it. He's so excited that he wants to build three dwellings – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He wants to preserve the moment. He wants to hold on to the glory for as long as he can. But God's voice interrupts him. Peter wants to freeze the glory and exist in that state forever. But that's not the point of the transfiguration. The point is to follow Jesus back down that mountain and into the valley.

Transfiguration is not an escape from the world, it is revelation for the sake of mission. The disciples must descend. And immediately below the mountain, in Matthew's Gospel, they go on to encounter a suffering child in need of healing. The glory of God does not remove us from pain. Instead it sends us into it with courage.

Today, we too, need to be sent into the valley with courage. In this moment that we are living through, of rising authoritarianism, of people struggling to purchase groceries or pay utilities, of rampant xenophobia and fear of anyone deemed as “other,” where suffering seems so widespread, we need the grounding of this story, of this transfiguration. We need to be able to find the glory of God when it often feels like, (or at least to me), that everywhere we look, I see darkness.

The Transfiguration teaches us that true glory looks different than worldly power. The world associates glory with spectacle, or force, or conquest, but God, in Jesus, reveals glory in self-giving love. The divine radiance of Jesus shines on the road to the cross.

The transfiguration also teaches us that we need mountain top moments. The disciples surely needed it. They were feeling confused and afraid, and they needed a moment where they could see Jesus more clearly. But we cannot stay there on those mountaintops, because faithfulness is truly cultivated in the valley.

Today as we hear this story, we, like the disciples are also commanded to “Listen to him.” Listen to Jesus. Not to loud, cultural Christianity, not to fear-based rhetoric, not to nationalism wrapped up in the language of Christianity. We are called to listen to him. And what does Jesus say? What does Jesus do?

He teaches us to love our enemies. To bless those who persecute you. To take up our cross. He teaches that the last shall be first and that the poor are blessed. Perhaps the transfiguration story is so important for us today because it clarifies whose voice defines us.

In times when Christianity is being used to sanctify power, the Transfiguration reminds us that Jesus’ glory is not revealed in domination, but in costly love. The mountain vision does not lead to triumphalism, it leads to the cross. And yet, the cross does not erase the light. The light still shines.

After the disciples hear the voice from heaven, they fall to the ground in terror, but Jesus reaches out his hand to them and says, “Get up. Do not be afraid.” In those words, we find hope. Jesus is with us on the mountaintop, and he goes with us into the valley. He goes with us when we see suffering, when we walk through darkness, when it feels like the world is falling apart. Jesus is with us when we do not understand what is going on in our lives or in our world. But he says, do not be afraid. The one who walks toward the cross is already radiant with resurrection light.

Mountaintops are places of transformation. In 1932, a man by the name of Myles Horton, established the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Horton grew up in rural Tennessee and experienced a deep Christian conviction that faith must reshape society. He was influenced by the Social Gospel and by studying labor movements abroad. He was also, at one

point a student of Reinhold Niebuhr. But he came to believe that ordinary people, when gathered and educated together, could see clearly their own dignity and power.

The school, situated in the Tennessee hills, initially focused on labor and adult education. By the early 1950s, however, it shifted its attention to race relations. Highlander was one of the few places in the South where integrated meetings could take place, and served as a site of leadership training for southern civil rights activists. Highlander became a kind of mountaintop space where miners, labor organizers, and later civil rights leaders like Rosa Parks stepped back from daily survival long enough to begin to imagine something different. Rosa Parks attended a training at Highlander four months before she famously instigated the Montgomery Bus Boycott (which was, by the way, a strategic action.)

The school was harassed, shut down by the state, and labeled subversive. But Horton and the school stayed. He stood with coal miners, sanitation workers, and Black Southerners under threat. Horton carried a vision of human dignity into places the powerful wanted kept quiet. Highlander was the mountain, but for Horton and others, the justice work always led back into the valley. In 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was among those who gathered together at the Highlander Folk School to mark its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I can't help but think of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King spoke to a crowd in Memphis, TN a few years later where sanitation workers were on strike:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life – longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The very next day he was assassinated. MLK was spurred on in his work of racial and economic justice by the vision of the transfigured Christ. He knew the ultimate end of the story, he knew that hope was on the horizon, and he knew, that even if he, himself, never emerged from the valley, the Christ of the mountaintop was with him.

The Transfiguration is like a window briefly thrown open, or like a light that flickers on, where we see reality as it truly is. And then the window closes, or the light flicks back off. But once you have seen the light, you cannot pretend it isn't there. We follow Jesus down the mountain because we have glimpsed his glory, glory that will help us go through these days unafraid. Amen.