

“God’s Invitation”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Transfiguration Sunday – March 2, 2014

Matthew 17: 1-8
Exodus 24: 12-18

If you were to look outside the window today, you’d think we were on the verge of celebrating Advent and Christmas, instead of gathered here on the first Sunday of March. It’s been a record-setting winter, to be sure. I don’t know about you, but I would just assume set new records for warmth and sunshine, rather than snow and cold!

This week, we will begin the season of Lent in the church year. Lent is similar to Advent, in that it is a time of preparation and anticipation for what is to come. In this season, we are preparing for Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, for his triumphant entry into the city on Palm Sunday, for his suffering death on the cross on Good Friday, and for his conquering of sin and death in his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Lent gives us the time to prepare ourselves for what God has in store for the world on Easter Sunday. Lent is the time which makes way for the King of Kings, and we use the color purple to represent the royalty of Jesus, the same as during Advent.

But we aren’t quite at the start of Lent, and today we celebrate the Transfiguration of the Lord. The story we’ve read today is familiar to us all. Yet it may not be as clear as to why we recognize this event in the life of Jesus now, on the eve of Lent, and not some other time during the Christian year. To be honest, it’s a good question, one which is worth exploring deeper. What’s the significance of Jesus’ transfiguration on the season of Lent?

Before addressing that question, let’s first examine what is actually happening when Jesus is transfigured on the top of the mountain. There are three events which make this mountain-top experience like no other. First, Jesus himself “was transfigured before them,” his physical features change right before Peter and James and John. “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” We know a little what it’s like for someone’s appearance to change: we notice a woman who is pregnant has a certain “glow” about her; or we can tell in very bright sunlight how someone’s clothes seem to shine in an unusual fashion. But what it was like for Jesus to be transfigured is truly unknown to us, for it was like nothing else seen before or ever again.

Second, two people appear out of nowhere standing beside Jesus: Moses and Elijah. We don’t know what they said. At first, we’re really not sure why these two men out of the Old Testament are selected to be with Jesus. But their presence is very symbolic in this instance. Moses represents the only other human who has seen God face-to-face, as we read from Exodus earlier this morning. And Elijah was very important to the Jews, for he was believed to be the one who would usher in the Messiah, the King of the Jews. Besides these

meanings, Moses and Elijah standing beside Jesus on the mountain-top represent the connection of the old with the new, the promise of a covenant people and the promise of the kingdom which is to come. One more time in their lives, Moses and Elijah were God's messengers to God's children.

Third, a cloud descends over the mountain, and a voice from heaven speaks to all who could hear. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That should sound familiar. It is the same phrase said by God when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John. On that occasion, the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. This time, a cloud has covered him, bright and dense, so that he shone even brighter than before. And God declares again how this one, the babe who laid in a manger and now stands on the mountain-top, is beloved by God.

In these three events, Jesus is transformed in some way. In what way, we are not sure, we will never be sure. But in both a physical and symbolic way, something "godly" happens on that mountain-top to Jesus that sets him apart. It is a godly act, it is a God-initiated act, which shows the might and power and glory of God to humans such as Peter and James and John, and for that matter, all of us. It is God's invitation to us to enter into the mystery of his love.

As I read this story from Exodus, I couldn't help but think of how God invites Moses and the Israelites into his presence on the top of Mount Sinai. God says, "Come up to me on the mountain," and Moses and Joshua dutifully follow God's command. And then, like Jesus and the disciples on the top of that transfiguration mountain, when Moses went up the mountain himself, "a cloud covered the mountain and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai." Moses stayed in the Lord's presence of that cloud for six days, a presence which was like "a devouring fire on the top of the mountain," and it was before all the Israelites to see themselves.

Prior to this passage in Exodus 24, Moses has been given the Ten Commandments in chapter 20, and there is a lot of detail and description given to how the law is to be applied to the daily life of the Israelites. Allen McSweeney writes: *There are laws regarding worship, the treatment of slaves, acts of violence, property and its restoration, as well as laws regarding social and religious customs, festivals, and ceremonies. The dominant concern in these chapters is the right ordering of the life of the covenant community in accord with the revealed law of God.*

Then, following the story of Moses's encounter with the glory of God on Sinai, we find another series of equally long and detailed chapters regarding the construction of the tabernacle, its architecture, decorations, offerings, etc. The modern reader is tempted to skip over these chapters that seem to have little relevance to us today.

However, the effect of reading Exodus 24 in its wider context can be dramatic. The theophany in Exodus 24 rises like a mountain peak above the flatlands of meticulous attention to the details of the moral life of the covenant community and the ordering of its worship. Suddenly we are startled by the mystical in the midst of the mundane - the awesome amid the ordinary, the

breathhtaking amid the boring.

McSween continues: *That is about as good a description of pastoral ministry as I know. Pastoral ministry is conducted amid the ordinary lives of ordinary (if not ornery) people. Much of a minister's time is occupied with maintaining at least some semblance of order in the congregation's life and worship. Sermons are written between discussions of what color to paint the men's restroom and what kind of bread to use for Communion.*

Yet, in the midst of the relentless routines of ministry "sometimes a light surprises," and we find ourselves started by parables of the transforming glory of God – an elusive glory that cannot be programmed or administered, only received with awe and wonder. In such times we may catch a glimpse of a glory that can break forth when we least expect it, with power to transform an otherwise quite ordinary event into an epiphany (Allen McSween, Jr., *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 436).

I believe God invites us into the mystery of the cloud on top of the mountain, to witness the light that surprises, and to be transfigured for the journey that lies ahead of us as Jesus' disciples. There are moments in our lives when we are Moses, when we are Peter and James and John, and we are invited by our God to "come up" and meet God on the mountain. There are times, amid the mundane, the stress-filled, the flat-plains of life, when we are called by God to look up, to listen, and to experience a light surprising us of the awe-inspiring, life-transforming gift of love in Jesus Christ.

When have you been invited to the mountain-top by God to experience that transfiguration? How did it make you feel? How were you transfigured to face what was back down at the foot of the mountain in your daily walk of faith? If you can't remember such a time, why do you think that is? Have you become so engrossed in the daily, mundane routine, that you are unable to hear God's invitation to "come up to me on the mountain?" What would it require of you to be more spiritually nourished to be able to hear, experience, and act on that invitation from God?

Moses did not stay on Mount Sinai. Peter, James and John did not stay on that mountain with Jesus. They all came down from the mountain-top. But they did so transfigured by the light of God's love for them, and empowered to serve faithfully as servants of their servant Lord. May our mountain-top experiences with God inspire us to do the same – today, tomorrow, and all of our days.

Thanks be to God. Amen.