

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, February 26, 2017 // Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, 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 dazzling white. 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 make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly 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!" 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 looked up, 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."

Background and general observations

This last Sunday of the season of the Epiphany concludes with one of the most powerful epiphanies of all—the Transfiguration. This story comes at the center of Matthew's story, between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection. Jesus takes his "inner circle" of disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain. (These are the same disciples whom Jesus will take with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus will be deeply troubled.) And, as we now know, a mountaintop is understood to be a place for divine encounter—Moses received the Ten Commandments and covenant there; Elijah experienced God in "a still small voice" there; and Jesus, of course, delivered the "Sermon on the Mount" there.

It is here, on a mountain, where Jesus is "transfigured" before the disciples. There is an otherworldly quality to this event, as we read that the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. The appearance of Moses and Elijah perhaps symbolizes the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Their appearance with Jesus clearly places him in a position of prominence, and some have suggested that this event is symbolic of Jesus' fulfillment of all of the Law and the Prophets. In other words, Jesus is the complete fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

The often-impetuous Peter can't contain himself and speaks (blurts?) first, proposing that they build a memorial or dwelling places on the site. Isn't this the all-too-human attempt to institutionalize that which cannot be institutionalized? Does Peter simply want to preserve this moment? Is this a way of documenting what cannot be properly documented? Or is he looking for something to do in a situation in which he should be still and attentive, and not do anything at all?

Then, from a cloud comes a voice, saying in effect the same thing that was said at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved"—but this time the voice adds a command, "Listen to him!" This is not a time for talking or planning, but a time to be quiet and listen, and that can be hard for many of us. Yet, perhaps this is just the command we should take with us into the season of Lent which begins with Ash Wednesday (March 1): be still, behold, and do not be afraid.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The fact that even Jesus' inner circle of disciples do not seem to understand divine occurrences, sometimes say very inappropriate things, and even let Jesus down when the going gets tough (falling asleep in Gethsemane, for example), might give us some relief. When we mess up, we might remember that even the cream of the crop failed miserably at times.

But the fact that Jesus had an inner circle at all might remind us of just how important it can be to have an "inner circle" ourselves—special people we love, trust and rely upon. We might all be able to name who is—or is not—in our inner circle, but what makes a person the *right* person to be in such a trusted and important position in one's life? What are the risks? And what are the rewards?

It could be helpful to think about not only who *your* trusted people are, but to whom you are one of the "chosen ones." What do you think is required of you as part of someone else's inner circle? What are the responsibilities that accompany such a trusted position?

2. Some have said about the Transfiguration that this event is an "unveiling," that the disciples are simply able, for a fleeting moment, to see Jesus clearly in all his glory. It's not that something has happened to change Jesus, but that the disciples are seeing things, however briefly, as they truly are; the veil has been lifted.

The clarity that comes with an unveiling or revelation is considered an epiphany. Have you experienced an extraordinary moment of this kind of epiphanic intensity?

Even a moment of profound peace, or certainty, might feel like a revelation. Has it ever happened that, out of the blue, you have been filled with wonder and gratitude at the splendor and beauty of your life and of the people and places around you?

What do you think of the possibility that such moments of splendor that inspire our awe and gratitude are really just unveilings of the deeper truth about our lives that we unfortunately miss all too often?

How can we position ourselves to see the world in all its glory—instead of going through our lives with a feeling that things are ordinary or even burdensome? What would it take to have you more often be startled by glory?

3. The Greek word that Matthew uses for the transfiguration is the same word that Paul uses to describe the change that is to take place within ourselves: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* (transfigured) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

To *conform*—to comply, agree, behave according to what is acceptable and conventional—is a very different task than to *transform*. In fact, those words might feel like opposites. Considering

that in the last few weeks of Bible study we have been concerned with moral rightness and proper behavior, this lesson that we must change ourselves entirely might feel complicated. On one hand, we know that God loves us just as we are. On the other hand, we are called to much more, to transformation.

What do you think this intended transformation or transfiguration of yourself is all about? Is this the point of being a Christian—that we pattern our lives in such a way and turn our attention and open our lives to divine things, so that we are transformed or transfigured into their likeness?

4. An Episcopal monk once wrote: “Almost everyone I know in the church complains about being too busy. We know being busy probably isn’t very good for us. Most of us have been so busy for so long and accomplished so little that we are quick to admit to the futility of all of this activity. But I wonder how often we see all of the busyness as sin. I wonder how often we see it as a kind of avoidance of being drawn into the real worship of God. I wonder if we realize how much our prayer suffers because of the lack of space in our lives. Not that we don’t make time for prayer. We may be quite faithful about carving out the time for prayer. But how often are we willing to surround the prayer with the solitude and leisure which is so important for listening to God? ... There are probably too many workshops in the Church and not enough places of silence and quiet.” (From an old newsletter from the Society of St. John the Evangelist, written by the late Thomas Shaw, who was then the superior of that Episcopal monastic order, and eventually was Bishop of Massachusetts before his death.)

It has been said that God gave ten commandments on the mountain top in the Old Testament and only one commandment in the New Testament: “Listen to him (Jesus).”

How do you respond to these reflections? Is your busyness an unconscious attempt to avoid listening to God and to the deepest truth about your life and who you are? What keeps you from devoting more time to such quiet and listening?

5. “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Some things are so precious that they need to be treasured, or carefully considered, or pondered in our hearts before we speak about them. Some things are so great and mysterious that our attempts to explain or talk about them would not make sense, at least not right away. Some things cannot be spoken about, but simply need to be experienced for ourselves. Some things are beyond words, beyond any language we have.

What do you know of needing to remain quiet about something important that has happened in your life? Concerning your relationship with God and your experience of the Divine, what do you know of things that, at least for a time, must not be spoken?

6. “Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’”

Jesus came and *touched them*.

It is sometimes noted that Christianity is an “incarnational” religion—that is, of flesh and skin and body. What do you make of the importance of touch in the spiritual life? Touch seems to play an important role throughout the Gospels, with people seeking to touch Jesus or Jesus reaching out to touch others. What would have been the difference in this story, if Jesus simply spoke to them without touching?

7. St. Stephen’s staff member Betsy Lee points out that Peter’s desire to build three dwellings on the mountain might, in some sense, relieve the disciples of their role to reveal the Divine in our own lives. If Peter can just build three dwellings on the mountain, people could come to this special place or revelation on a mountain, instead of finding the revelation of God in ourselves.

Does this strike a chord with you? What do you know of seeking to locate the revelation of holiness and divinity somewhere *outside yourself* and thereby avoiding the *internal* calling to manifest the divine in your own life?