

*Date: February 23*

*Texts: Psalm 99*

*Texts: Exodus 24:12-18*

*Texts: 2 Peter 1:16-21*

*Texts: Matt 17:1-9*

### ***Introduction:***

Well, friends. Today is an important holiday in the Christian calendar--that is, in that "liturgical year" that we've dropped in on for a little while. Today is what's called "Transfiguration Sunday," the day where we remember Jesus' transfiguration--his temporary change in person, in image--on a mountaintop with three of his most committed followers.

Not accidentally, the lectionary texts that were read to us highlight Jesus' transfiguration. Surprise, right? But this is pretty bonus, as far as the preaching task goes. It's what we're going to talk about. And while Luke does offer us a picture of the transfiguration, too, we'll focus on Matthew's, because, you know...It was the text for the day.

### ***Dropping Out:***

And today is actually our last Sunday in this "Dropping In" series, with its focus on the Lectionary Texts. We're going to move forward with a series based on Paul's

statement in Philippians 3, in which he says, “It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.”

Basically, what I want to do is sift through the years of messages that I’ve done, pick out those ones that speak to what I think are the most important things I can say, and remix them a little, correct them a little, repeat myself a little, and, you know, hopefully position us for faithful reflection and action. We’ll see.

Right now, let’s pray then talk about Jesus’ Transfiguration.

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***On Top of a Mountain...***

I love what happens to Jesus today. I love how weird it is. I love how much it reveals about Jesus. I love Peter’s response to Jesus, because it’s so perfectly human--it’s so reasonable, given, you know, life, but so unreasonable, given how much Peter saw in Jesus’ life prior to this moment.

Right before this Transfiguration moment Jesus says something. He says: “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the

Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Jesus says this, and then Matthew tells us:

***After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.***

The way Matthew begins today's passage is significant. In his Gospel he almost never tells us how many days take place between this thing or that thing Jesus does. But Matthew does here. And it's a way to directly link what Jesus just said about "seeing the Son of Man come into his kingdom" to right now. In Matthew's mind at least--and so, in ours, too--this scene on this mountain top is what Jesus is referencing when he promises that some of them will see Jesus coming into his own.

***...all covered with the Kingdom of Heaven:***

Let's review Kingdom language for a second. A Kingdom, of course, is a place where one will determines everything. One will; one person. We understand law as a "body" of things that we should conform to; in a kingdom, the law is not a "body of rules"--it is a "body"--a person--one ruler, making all the rules. We don't live in a kingdom, of course, and

we can see the ways that's a grace to us.

In a Kingdom the law is the will of one being, one person in power, and what he or she says goes.

We hear "kingdom" and we think "place"--a kingdom is a place where there is a king. But the word "basilea," which we translate "Kingdom," in Greek doesn't emphasize a place so much as the activity of the one who is king. The capability and right that a single will, a single person, has to rule over others.

And so "the Kingdom of Heaven," as Matthew puts it before this moment, it's the reigning component, the capability and right of God to express His will, and His purpose, and His goals. It's not a place. It's definitely not "Heaven" the way we think of Heaven. God's Kingdom is God's right to rule.

What Peter and John and James see up on this mountain is a glimpse of God's power, of His will and His right to determine how He should be obeyed. This is what Jesus thinks his disciples will discover as he drags them up to the top of this mountain.

And something happens.

**Woah!**

**2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.**

**4 Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”**

**5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”**

### **Mountaintop: Theophany**

A mountaintop. The voice of God and the cloud. Clothes that shine like “lightning flashes.” Jesus’ changed face. And of course, the onlookers’ fear.

These things are Old Testament markers of what happens when God shows up. We see some of them in the passage from Exodus that was read to us. The term for this is a “theophany,” Greek for “God Manifested” or “God Revealed.” When God shows up

in the Old Testament, this is how people experience it. This is what Moses experienced.

If they had thought about it at all, Peter and John and James would have described God showing up in this way. They would have expected this, having been shaped and formed by their Bibles.

They wouldn't have expected Jesus to initiate this theophany; God initiated these sort of things. They also wouldn't have expected God to say, of this Jesus--even if he's the Messiah, the Hope of all Humanity and all Creation--"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

God usually communicates, basically, "Listen to me!" not "Listen to him." But here God identifies as especially Jesus' father: This "Son of Man," as Jesus calls himself, or "Son of the Most High God," as demons call him, is granted all the family rights over all the family property--and the family property happens to be everything, include James, John, Peter.

They are getting a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven, God's right to determine how he should be obeyed, and what they discover is God saying "Listen to Jesus." This is what God wants of them, and of us.

***Mountaintop:  
Moses, Elijah, Jesus***

And with Jesus are Moses and Elijah. They are really there, somehow, bodily--although with something like superhero bodies--and Jesus is really talking to them. Both of them experienced theophanies.

Moses was, of course, one of the greatest Old Testament characters. He released Israel from their 400 years of ethnic slavery in Egypt, he led them in this exodus to the promised land, and along the way God gave to Israel, through Moses, the special way of living that He expected from His People. The Torah, we call it. The Law. We saw some of it as it was read to us today.

Elijah was the go-to prophet. He was the standard prophet. Elijah is to prophets what McDonald's is to fast food. He was Israel's pop-cultural standard, and the greatest of prophets, the ideal prophet. Elijah, if we don't remember, was snatched away bodily by God, and everyone expected him to show up again and pave the way for the Messiah.

***Mountaintop: "Law & Prophets"***

Jesus says, of course, that John the Baptist fulfilled this

expectation. But whatever happened to Elijah, he and Moses are alike now: shining, bright. More real than real. It's like they're covered in glitter lotion.

And if we don't remember glitter lotion, we might remember how Jesus is always asking people what "the Law and the Prophets" say when they ask him questions.

This is a common way for him to talk about what we call the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah are representatives of the Old Testament. They are the Law and the Prophets, embodied, representatives of all God's work in history in this moment.

The Old Testament and the New are in conversation here. This is amazing. This is powerful. This is crazy and exciting. Which is why Peter, the beloved meatball, says what he says.

### ***Mountaintop: #SaintPeterFail?***

I think Peter is doing what any of us would do, what we all have done in similar situations: he is trying to hang onto the good thing that's going on. He clings to the idea of it: ***"Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."***



This is perfect. This is so human of Peter. And we all do this. If something seems good, we want to hang onto it for as long as we can.

We want to make something good permanent. But to make a good things permanent is often--not always, but often--to take away some of the goodness we were trying to protect in the first place. In this case, of course, if Jesus settles down here, whatever else it would mean it would definitely mean no crucifixion, no resurrection, no hope for humanity. The devil would win, and sin and death with him.

We can all think of times when we've held on too long to something good, and in the process, taken away some of what was good about it. We've clung to relationships when we should have let them go. We've clung to ideas--about God, about ourselves--when we should have let them go. We've turned pleasures and hobbies into addictions or just things that claim more of our resources than they should. We've held onto things so long that when we finally try to let go of them, realizing they aren't good anymore, we find that they won't let go of us.

Are there things in our lives that are good--or were

good--but that we need to give up? Have we tried to make permanent something that is only, and should only be, temporary? Time passes, you know; the present passes away. God will make good of our choices to trust him as it does. But we must be people who receive “right now’s good” as a gift. Peter’s suggestion was ultimately a selfish, short-sighted one. We’re called to taking a long-view of our lives and living selflessly. Those are impossible things to do if we’re trying to hold too tightly to what seems good right now. There are many poisons that taste sweet when we first take them in.

***Together:***

And ever since Peter first tried to build huts for Moses, and Elijah, and Jesus to live in, the Church has been trying to keep things going that we think are good, even when it’s not the right thing for them to keep going. Peter didn’t know what he was saying because, first of all, he was sleepy, right? And we’ve never done our best thinking when we’re sleepy. We do our best fighting and our best justifying sin, but never, you know, thoughtful reflection. And second of all, he wasn’t paying close enough attention to Jesus.

I have become convinced that if we pay close attention to Jesus, he’ll let us know when it’s time to

let go of good things so that better things can come along.

I mean, the Christian life isn't a life like Peter wants here. It's not that it's bad to settle down physically; it's always the case that the deeper our roots to a place are, the more it becomes our place, and following this, the more we generally care for it, want its good. Permanence and not quickly leaving a place or a situation is a virtue, I think.

But again, the Christian life is not one in which we can build for ourselves huts to populate with whatever we think is good in the moment. If Jesus stayed put, his journey to Jerusalem would have stalled out, and our journey from the fear of death and slavery to sin wouldn't ever have started. No Holy Spirit. No Church. No freedom. No hope. Jesus transfigured for no reason at all.

We will always be tempted to make permanent something that's fruitful, but as Jesus says elsewhere, if something is fruitless, and the only good it has was yesterday's good, then it needs pruned. Peter's response to this reminds us as a congregation to receive the good God does with us as a gift, not a right; for today, not forever.

## ***Mountaintop: #SaintPeterFail?***

There's another way of reading what Peter was doing here. It's less critical, maybe. We can read Peter as simply giving voice to happiness. He thinks the timing is great; they're there! And all he wants to be is helpful, set up some tents, make people feel at home.

Honestly, even if this is all he's trying to do, he's still trying to cling to something that can't be clung to. And it also still implies some sort of blindness to the truth of what he was seeing.

Things end, as they do. God's voice interrupts Peter, the cloud falls upon them, and they freak out, falling prostrate on the ground, because that's what you do in a Theophany. Humility flips on, you know?

But:

## ***Ending:***

***...Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.***

***9 As they were coming down the mountain,***

***Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”***

Every Theophany ends with a declaration not to be afraid; it becomes the beginning of the obedient life lived by those who God appeared to.

The great, weird, mysterious transfiguration of Jesus wasn't just some great, weird, mysterious thing that happened to Jesus. It was a clear moment God blessed three of Jesus' disciples with: That Jesus was more than the Messiah, somehow; more than anything they'd seen before. They needed to know that from this point on, all their time with him is one great ongoing theophany, the manifestation of God, whose Kingdom is made most real in the obedience those who follow Jesus have to him.

### ***Conclusions: Listening***

I want to leave us with this:

Are we trying to cling to some good that we should not cling to? Have we taken some good thing, and in our efforts to make it last forever, turned into something bad? The world is full of sweetness, of good people, places, things. But following Jesus means letting him

lead us forward, and receiving the present as a gift. We can't cling to this moment, because if we do we will trade away whatever goodness the future might bring, and the good of today will stale.

Are we listening to Jesus? God the Father has rights over His creation, and He has handed those rights to rule over to His Son, whose will for us our good.

If we're not listening to Jesus, whatever it is we're doing, it's somehow "less than." We're living up to something less than the best version of ourselves.

### ***Conclusions: Fear***

And let's not be afraid.

The first thing Jesus says to his three closest friends, the ones who most deeply trust him, after hearing God say "Listen to him!" is "Don't be afraid."

We always need to know what Jesus knew, that God loves us, that God is well-pleased with us, that we are God's Children, and even, that we ought to be listened to--at least, we ought to be listened to when we ourselves are most obedient, most sensitive to the Spirit, most fully in prayer and attentive to God.

And when we see the Kingdom of Heaven being played out, and God doing things around us, we ought to discover in ourselves something that is a little bit like fear. We aren't meant to be afraid, but we are meant to be awestruck, we are meant to realize that we--us, so weak, so small, so mortal and prone to self-destruction at least--when we see that God is working through us, and we discover God working in spite of us, it should drop us to our knees--at least figuratively, and at least in awe.

And it may be that one or two of us have experienced such closeness with God that we've recognized, in that moment, the truth of our own sinfulness, and something much more like fear than awe catches us. We need to cling to the "Don't be afraid," too, knowing we are God's beloved children, in whom He takes great pleasure.

In the transfiguration, for a moment, the Old and the New were brought together; God revealed the absolute rights of this Messiah, and His deep, deep love for him. We ourselves are loved at that same depth. And we who listen to Jesus, who receive the good of the present moment as a gift rather than a right to be captured, and who live without fear, we're off to a good start in bearing witness to the Kingdom

of Heaven. We live a little bit transfigured, a little bit of glory clinging to us, and people see, and want the good things we have to offer to last as long as they can.