

Sermon, Epiphany, Last  
Year A, 2014

The story of Jesus' Transfiguration is a half way point in the Gospel of Matthew and in the church's calendar. We heard the story of Jesus' baptism about fifty days ago and the account of his passion and resurrection will come about fifty days from now. The Transfiguration has elements of both Jesus' baptism and his glorification in it and reminds us of how the story of Jesus' ministry began and points us to how it will end.

There are many aspects to this story that we can reflect on. But I'd like to focus on four phrases spoken in the Gospel-- two phrases said by God from the bright cloud during this divine encounter; and two phrases said by Jesus after the cloud was gone and when the disciples were alone with him.

The first phrase from God echoes what we also heard at Jesus' baptism—"This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." There is a temptation to hear these words but not really have them sink down into our hearts. We may think of it as just some more religious language. Or there is another temptation just to hear these words as if we were overhearing our Dad complimenting our brother—that's fine for him, but what about me? So let's try to hear these words again, differently.

In the two places where spoken words are attributed to God in the Gospels, God's words are expressions of love. Both convey a sense of deep love that expresses the very heart of God. God can be moved, God can be motivated by love, like any truly loving parent. God is not indifferent or distant, God is not perpetually angry. No, whether in creation or correction, the very heart of God is expressed as love. If we can remember and believe that, our lives can be transformed.

We may see that and believe in God's love but respond, "Well, God's love was directed to Jesus. He was perfect. Jesus is like a holy superman, so of course God would love him. What about us? Does God really love us? Or is God's love reserved for just the superhuman, like Jesus?"

What the church believes about Jesus is multi-faceted: Jesus was and is perfect; his sacrifice and love for us enables us to live in and into his perfection by faith. But it is important to remember that wherever we are in our journey, God loves us, too. Jesus was one of us, a representative of us and what makes us human. So though God's expression of love for Jesus was unique in one sense; yet because Jesus was one of us, we can trust that God's love exists deeply for each one of us, too. We are Beloved.

So as we enter this time between Jesus' baptism and his Passion and resurrection, let us imagine those words spoken to us. We are—I am-- God's beloved. If we believe that God's love for us is real, then we can be set free from two different and unhelpful ways of being in the world that are the result of us feeling unloved.

First, we no longer have to stay stuck, paralyzed in a dark place of doubt, wondering if God-- or anyone-- truly loves us. The rays of God's love can shine on us and answer that

question for us. There is hope and energy coursing in the world that calls us to new life as clearly as the spring calls the buds to flower. So if we feel stuck today, unloved, know that God's message to Jesus is our message by grace, too. We are Beloved.

Second, we no longer have to be the person who is always busy, always working to achieve something that makes us feel worthy of love. That driven ambition that motivates some of us can be set aside. Life is not a contest with others to see who can win the most and thus be at the top of the mountain, reflecting in God's love. Life and God's love do not play that game; and the sooner we learn that, the better our lives will be. We can rest in God's love for us—and share that love with others.

The second phrase from God is an addition to the message at Jesus' baptism. It is simple, "Listen to him." In our lives of faith and Christian discipleship, we have one point of contact that matters ultimately—the teaching of Jesus. That can get confusing to us because we live in a culture with many messages, many of them clothed in the outward garments of faith and morality, but far from the teaching of Jesus.

For example, Jesus has words for us about how we see and come along side to help people in poverty. He teaches us about how we are to handle power. Jesus taught constantly about our relationship to money. Jesus was clear about how forgiveness is to govern and correct us in our relationships with friends-- and enemies. The list goes on. And at least for me, too often the words of Jesus are conveniently ignored for some other way that is more expedient or "realistic."

Now as we approach Lent, I'd like to suggest a simple way for us to "Listen to him." I have made copies of a reading plan that includes the lectionary Gospel appointed for this year—Matthew. If we follow this reading plan during Lent, we will complete reading the Gospel according to Matthew. So let's do that—listen to him. Keep a notebook and write down what you hear. Let Jesus' words challenge and guide us not only for Lent but throughout our life on earth.

The third phrase we heard in today's Gospel is from Jesus, "Get up." The specific context is that his disciples are laid out after their experience of God's presence. But this message can be applied more universally. We hear similar words throughout the Bible when God or Jesus says "You have worried and prayed enough—now it is time to act on what you say you believe." It is a fundamental call to action for people of faith—get up and do what God commands.

How does this message "Get up" apply for us today—individually and as a community? The individual message will vary. We can use Lent as a time to experiment with what we believe God wants from and for us. As we experiment, it may mean some failure or even some embarrassment. But that's okay if we remember that earlier message—we are beloved of God and there is nothing we can do to change that deep and eternal love in God's heart for each of us.

For me individually, I am going to experiment in two general areas. First, Lynn and I are going to follow the Daniel Plan during Lent. This plan was offered by Bishop Wright to all in his Diocese. The basic plan is about faith, food, and fitness. What will affect me-- and

be an area of possible failure—is my being intentional in what I eat (and don't eat!) and how often I exercise. My goal is to give up many of my favorite processed foods (like cookies and Ritz crackers); and convenience-based eating at fast food restaurants. I also plan to take time to schedule exercise so I don't have the excuse of not enough time or being too tired. I may fail more than once—but I promise I will get up.

The second area I want to experiment with during Lent is engaging in conversation with more of you about difficult issues. I will never use the pulpit for politics. But you can expect me to experiment with speaking more clearly and openly about how our faith in what Jesus said informs us in what civil policies and political processes we support. My goal in this experimentation is not to be a partisan; but rather to help us all consider tough issues, even when it can cause discomfort for some of us—including me.

For us as a community of faith, we continue to discern and work toward action as we are called to “get up.” At our recent vestry retreat, we set two goals as first steps toward getting up from our comfort zone: one is to be part of creating a “Church of the Common Ground” for Forsyth County; and the second is to pursue options for us to learn Spanish together. What will that mean for us in the months and years ahead? Frankly, I don't know. But I do believe that the Lord who tells us to “Get up” will be with us wherever we may go.

The last phrase from the story of the Transfiguration (and the second spoken by Jesus) is “Do not be afraid.” Because of God's love for us-- and in spite of the risks that we take as we get up and listen to Jesus-- we do not have to fear. In the first century, this message was raw and real, as people faced losing so much-- family relationships, jobs, property, and even their lives due to their faith in Jesus. In places around the world and throughout history including today, that message, “Do not be afraid” continues to be needed and powerful as people of faith face fears of loss and follow Jesus.

For us in our country, in our community, in our families and our individual lives; how does this message—“Do not be afraid”-- apply today? What are we afraid of and why? Lent is a time for us to explore our fears. It will vary for each one of us individually and for us as a community. The top two universal fears are public speaking and death. We often are afraid of what others think of us. We are often afraid of what might happen to people we love. We may be afraid of our future-- perhaps about a new job or a move or a new ministry or something else that may cause fear as we look ahead in our lives.

But our fears are fruitful ground to work in if we are to grow as people of faith. This Lent, think of one thing you are afraid of and focus there. Try to choose a fear that may be holding you back from what God is calling you to do. Then admit your fear to God and to one trusted person. Pray about it and come up with a plan for what you could do, even with little steps, to trust God and overcome it. Then do it.

This Wednesday we begin our journey with Jesus and the church as we move toward Jesus' Passion and resurrection. As we walk together, let us remember God's great love for us, let us listen to the words of Jesus, and let us get up and not be afraid.

Amen.