

## Matthew 17:1-9 Transfiguration 2.16.23 Bill Uetricht

The sermon begins with a You Tube video on the metamorphosis of a butterfly.

I think most of you know that I love to preach. It's a real privilege to me, and frankly, a lot of fun. But I must admit that when it comes to this weekend in the church year—the Transfiguration of our Lord weekend—I tend not to look forward to the preaching task. It's an odd day to me. It seems so out of touch with modern life. The stories for the day seem over the top, especially difficult for us modern types. What do we moderns do with a story about a couple of dead guys—Moses and Elijah--talking with Jesus?

As I have shared before, when Bev and I lived in Toledo we weren't far from a church where people spoke with the dead regularly. Let's be honest. These people were an odd bunch. This guy (pointing to myself) with eight years of post-high-school education found it hard to connect with these characters. I mean, what century were they living in? Certainly not the twentieth, much less the twenty-first. So, Matthew's story about Moses, Elijah, a couple of dead guys, having a conversation with Jesus on a mountain seems strange to me.

And truthfully, the story from Exodus is similarly strange. This one is all about Moses. It's clear that he is the main guy. The story aids us in seeing that he is the primary mediator between God and God's people, a reality that helps us understand why he shows up in Matthew's transfiguration story.

Well, God invites this really important man up on a mountain, asking him to wait on that mountain until he will give him tablets of stone, on which will be etched the law and the commandment. So, Moses takes Joshua up with him and leaves behind some elders who are asked to attend to the whining, complaining, and contentiousness of the people while Moses is away.

Before Moses and Joshua get to the top of the mountain, it appears that Joshua stops the climbing. Moses is now on his own. He then alone confronts the presence of God. A cloud covers the mountain. And we are told that the glory of the Lord tabernacled, dwelled upon Mount Sinai at that point. And this glory is said to be like a big fire, a consuming fire. But Moses can deal with that. He goes into the cloud. He enters the presence of God and is not hurt or even killed.

This all seems strange to me. I am a twenty-first century guy who is trained in good rational thought. This seems a bit too irrational, too ethereal, mystical to me. How do you bring on home this kind of strangeness to people who talk about cold fronts and low-pressure systems when they speak about the weather, who mention germs and bacteria and antibiotics when dealing with disease, whose minds and ways are shaped by science.

I must admit, though, as I have grown older, and have dealt with my own experiences and have heard the stories of other, I am becoming more compelled by the reality of mystical happenings. There's stuff that occurs in life that is beyond rational explanation, stuff that gives us a glimpse into the big, the wonderful, the transcendent, a glimpse into the divine, the presence of God.

So, I have to wonder if a day like Transfiguration Day is not meant to give us such a glimpse. And maybe us modern folks, like me, would do well to pay attention to this glimpse, to soak ourselves, even lose ourselves, in the big, the wonderful, that which is beyond description. Today I am wondering about wonder.

Now I am very aware that we are gathering again in light of some very difficult and ugly circumstances. Three young people murdered and five others shot at Michigan State. Events like these require some good rational thought on important topics like guns and the mental health crises of our times. And I am convinced that until we have better

conversations about these topics, we will continue to experience more of the same. But I also believe that diminishment of wonder in our time is a major contributing factor to the sicknesses of our times. If life is just predictable, an experience of flatness, lacking that which causes your jaw to drop, you may often treat the earth, people, and life, for that matter, as if they are just cogs in somebody's wheel, just one more commodity, impediments to what you really want. Wonder, on the other hand, causes you to stop, breathe in, to view people and life differently, to be amazed.

Amazement is what we encounter up on the mountain with Moses when he alone gets to experience the glory of the Lord, when he enters the cloud. It's amazement that we meet when six days later—remember Moses had to wait six days--Jesus in Matthew takes with him Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain. It's amazement that we and the disciples experience when Jesus is transfigured before them, when his face shines like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white. It's amazement that causes the disciples to fall to the ground on their faces and be overcome with awe.

We do well to wonder about wonder, to be awed by awe, to be bedazzled by the dazzling, to be confounded by the confounding, to be stunned by the stunning, to be baffled by the baffling, to be perplexed by the perplexing, to be enchanted by that which is enchanting. We do well to watch a video of the metamorphosis, the transfiguration, of a caterpillar into a butterfly, only to respond with, "Life is amazing." There is more to life than we can see. There is more to life than we can touch. Life is penetrated by that which takes us into mystery, moves us beyond ourselves, our little worlds, our little stories. We live in light of the big, the truly magnificent. Maybe occasionally then, it is worth our while to fall on our faces, fall on our knees, shut our mouths, get off our high horses, and catch a healthy glimpse of our smallness.

Transfiguration has got me wondering about wonder. Now truthfully, you probably can't write a prescription for wonder for people. But we are entering a time in the church year that in some ways with its emphasis on the practices of faith—prayer, fasting, meditation, study, and even giving—is trying to provide us with opportunities that take us out of the ordinary humdrum, fast-paced approach to living that too often keeps us from wonder. Lent wants us to go deeper. Lent wants to give us disciplines so that grace becomes more real, so that we are captured more by wonder and awe. The same old same old is only going to give you more of the same old same old. What could a Lent look like for you that might bring you change, might offer you some chances to breathe, to walk in the woods, to climb some hills, to spend some time in silence, to nurture that which makes your jaw drop?

Wonder with me about wonder, won't you? Now, I have to tell you that Lent will not let you wonder simply about the wonder of creation, the wonder of life itself. Lent is heading somewhere that includes the hard parts of life. Lent is taking us to the cross, to the place of incredible suffering, to the place that will make us wonder whether life is indeed wonder-full. The wonder we are being called into isn't naïve, doesn't pretend that life is not filled with pain. What we will experience in Lent, especially at its end, is an honest confrontation with life's misery.

Yet for some strange reason, and maybe this is what the Transfiguration story is helping us to see, this cross thing is not something we will want to run from. The light today is shining on the one who is heading to the cross. It's as if we are being told, "Yes, Jesus is going the right way. You may think that he is a failure. You may wonder if what he is up to is not at all a part of the wonder of God, but it is. This is the wonder-full thing. God is not simply encountered on the

mountains, not simply experienced in the amazement of the transformation of the monarch butterfly. God is also known in the depths of human pain.”

I know that’s hard to believe, but many of us can testify to the truth of it. Oh, it’s not that we want the pain. Heck, no! And you should run from those who suggest that you should want it. But somehow, wonder of wonders, often in the midst of human pain is a solidarity with others that we seldom know in any other way. The cross of Lent takes us to the solidarity of God with *all* of us. That is a wonder worth our while spending at least forty days and forty nights with.

Life, pain, and death are all penetrated by something remarkably big, something wonderful, something even enchanting. That is a reason to get lost, as the old hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” says, “in wonder, love, and praise.”