

An Embodied Hope

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Texts: Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17: 1-9

I've brought with me this morning a prayer book entitled *Prayers for the People: Things We Didn't Know We Could Say to God* by Terry J. Stokes. It's quite unusual. Did you all know you can say anything to God? It's true! It has prayers for everything from prayers for after being ghosted to prayers for before visiting family for a holiday to a prayer for the haters to a prayer for selecting a new show to watch on Netflix. The breadth and depth is really something. For today, we will pray a prayer entitled *A Prayer for Wrestling with God*...

Today we arrive at the pivot point between two liturgical seasons. Epiphany has ended and our journey into Lent has yet to begin. We encounter a story that reaches back in time to Moses' vision of the burning bush and at the same time looks forward to Jesus' future resurrection. As soon as Jesus' closest friends, Peter, James, and John, arrive in that in-between place on the mountaintop Jesus is made visible as the Messiah, his body becomes transfigured with white glimmering robes and his face shines like the sun. As people sitting in pews in Cambridge, MA, it's hard to get our minds around what this scene might have looked like. We wonder if it even happened in this way at all. Over the years I have wrestled with this text and not yet found comfort with it. Maybe that's the mark of a good sacred story. Maybe some of you all feel the same way too. So, I have a little show and tell for us. Lee, a little help?

Did you all see what happened in Brazil in the news this week just in time for Transfiguration Sunday? A photographer captured the breathtaking moment that lightning struck the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro this past Friday. This stunning picture, which has gone viral on social media, shows a bolt of lightning hitting the head of the nearly 100-foot-tall Jesus statue — the largest depiction of him in the world and one of the 7 wonders of the world. It looks like something out of a sci fi or horror movie to be honest. This image at once elicits an experience of fear and maybe even laughter as we behold a giant Jesus with a beam of light connected to his head on this larger than life mountaintop. Apparently, this phenomenon happens about 3-5 times a year.

Perhaps this is what it was like when Peter, James, and John saw Jesus lit from within on that mountain top all those years ago. We'll never know. But whether we hold the possibility of something that looks like this actually happening or we see the transfiguration as more of a metaphor that illuminates a truth about Jesus' identity, there is a purpose to the inclusion of this story in our collective spiritual history. The author of the gospel of Matthew recounts this narrative because his audience and community deeply need a concrete reminder of the hope that is promised to us all: that Jesus is the Messiah and that they will one day participate in the resurrection with him. They need assurance that God's glory is made tangibly visible as they navigate their own experiences of uncertainty and suffering in their world. This is a sacred story that connects their own hope for liberation of all God's people to their ancestors' experiences of God's truth too. So, what can we learn from this narrative so full of mystery and allusion to all the parts of God's redemptive work in the world? How do we wade through all that information?

Oftentimes when we encounter and interpret this story that links Jesus to the law and the prophets of his Jewish tradition and God's vision for the future, we tend to focus on the flashy bits. We assume that the miraculous, incredulous moment of illumination is the part that can teach us something. And, it certainly can. Or maybe we jump on the favorite homiletic bandwagon of chastising Peter for attempting to be a host for these rock stars of the Jewish prophetic tradition by constructing accommodations on that mountain (which is a perfectly reasonable reaction by the way.)

This morning, I invite us to put these moments aside and turn our attention to Jesus' first actions after God's voice commands the preoccupied and fearful disciples to listen to God's son. The text says that after God's voice from the cloud commands the disciples to listen to Jesus, "he came and touched the disciples, saying, " Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone."

The fear-inducing scene of God in a cloud and of Jesus shining like a disco ball disappears and we are drawn back into the world as it was before the flashes of light and theophany in the form of a talking cloud. Jesus knows the reality they are all about to face. He even tells the disciples at the end of this passage not to tell anyone about what happened up on the mountain until after he has been killed and raised from the dead. He honors that truth as he sees his friends crouching in fear. And what does he do first? His first instinct after the transfiguration is to get close, to reach out with a comforting touch and encourage them to pick themselves up

and to not be afraid of things past and things to come. This embodiment of hope makes room for them to imagine a way forward for their future.

We too are in the midst of what often feels like too much for our hearts and minds to process. As our ancestors in faith did, we too need the story of the transfiguration. Recently I came across a video of a young person walking on freshly fallen snow. It was recorded so that all the viewer could see was the person taking one step in front of the other. The text overlaid on the footage read like this: "I keep having flashbacks looking at my feet as I was running during a mass shooting I was in. Today I kept looking at my feet in hopes it would help my brain realize I'm safe and I'm not running for my life anymore." The tragedy and suffering in our current reality is all too real. From toxins pouring into our environment in Ohio, to the violence in our policing, to the grief present in unaffordable health care and housing, to the tragedies of war and natural disaster, to our personal losses and seasons of uncertainty, we are all too familiar with the suffering of this world. And so, this text begs the question: so, where does the glory of God and the hope in some kind of resurrection fit into our current reality?

The usual reading of the transfiguration story is that it is meant to function as a moment of deep assurance of Jesus' identity as God's anointed. This moment is also supposed to acknowledge that the hope in Jesus' resurrection and our participation in it is framed narratively by Jesus' predictions of his suffering on the cross. It is not merely a story of all hope and joy or of all anticipatory grief and trauma. As we often say here at First Church it's a both/and. The story of the transfiguration is not one of a simple assurance that we live in a world where God's glory stamps out all suffering or stops bad things from happening. It is an assurance that the cross and the resurrection, that God's glory and the deepness of human tragedy and frailty are bound up in one another, that they are knit together. As it's been said before, God's redemptive power and our hope in some sort of salvation, some sort of healing, does not erase the trauma of crucifixion. Instead, seeing us in our humanness, the source of love itself reaches out with a gentle touch and reassures us that we are strong enough to get up, and that it's safe enough to put aside our fear in the face of whatever is to come next.

First Church, I'm unable to speak an uncomplicated hope. I'm unable to believe in a hope that does not also acknowledge the existence of the road to Jerusalem. An uncomplicated image of God's glory leaves me wondering how it fits in with the world as it is. You see, I need a divine light that gets close to what we are afraid to look at, I need the radiance of God to get low enough to touch the parts of our lives and our world that are wounded and feel untouchable. I need a God with a human body that is called beloved and that hurts like mine

and that displays a hope that acknowledges our fear, anger, and pain. As we learn how to heal from what has left us undone in our lives we need an experience of a Jesus who encourages us to hope by putting one foot in front of the other, who teaches us to feel safe again in a world that sometimes makes us run for our lives.

Perhaps the big reveal of God's glory in the transfiguration has less to do with the bright and arresting light but has everything to do with the quiet and gentle touch of Jesus in our deepest moments of fear and confusion. We might feel this presence in the form of a hug from a dear friend, from a trusted person hearing and holding confessions of deep depression and not running away, from a network of support when we take a risk in our relationships or vocational path, when we listen to the wisdom of an ancestor, or simply when we notice early buds forming on previously barren trees and know in our bodies that God is in this life somehow.

This kind of hope that shows up in the transfiguration holds the truth of God's presence and promises with us despite and because of everything. It believes in a redemption and a freedom in the path before us even when we are not able to imagine it ourselves. In a poem by Emily Dickinson she speaks about this kind of gentle hope. Her words read:

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -*

*And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.*

The song of an authentic hope has no simple words to sing. It escapes being contained into something our minds can intellectualize. It yearns to be felt by our bodies. It hums, perched in our souls, not demanding tidy conclusions or trite phrases of consolation, no, but only that we listen to Jesus' tender and arresting words: get up, do not be afraid. It is a hope that tells our truth and it sets us free. God's glory and promised hope is knit together with the grief of the cross, but we know that the story of the cross will not speak the last word. This kind of hope whispers to our weary hearts, get up dear one, my beloved child, take that next step towards healing, repair, and resurrection in safety and without fear. May we have the courage to sing its song. Amen.

