

“Transition and Transfiguration”
Exodus 24: 12-18 ; Matthew 17: 1-9
Margot Trusty Pickett
First Congregational UCC, Asheville, NC
February 26, 2017

Maybe you remember when George Bush Sr. made a campaign stop in a nursing home not too far from here. When he came to an elderly gentleman bent over in his wheelchair, Bush leaned over and asked, “Sir, do you know who I am?” The man looked up and said, “No, but if you go to the nurses’ station, I’m sure they can tell you.”

Peter Marty, the publisher of the journal *The Christian Century*, told that story as part of his introduction in a recent issue of the magazine called “Being Trans.” Marty went on to say, “I have no idea if [Bush] followed up on the man’s suggestion and, if he did, what identity some nurse assigned to him. But the story opens the door to remembering the many ways in which all of us search for identity during the course of our lives. Identity questions are not reserved for the lost, the odd, the weak, [and the young]....For some people, identity questions revolve around appearance, social acceptance, or vocational discernment. For others, it’s economic status or the anxieties accompanying relationships. For still others, questions of gender identity loom large” (Jan 18, 2017, p 3).

After several more paragraphs, Marty concludes by saying, “Finally, for Christians, discussions of individual gender identity need to include but go beyond personal rights to acknowledge that we are formed by others, shaped by community, and secured within the hand of God.”

What does this have to do with today’s scripture?

Well, let’s review.

For the past several Sundays we have been sitting on a mountaintop listening to Jesus preach as we’ve read passages from the Sermon on the Mount in the early chapters of Matthew’s gospel. And now today suddenly we’ve jumped ahead about 10 or 11 chapters and we find ourselves trekking up a mountain again with Jesus and his inner circle. Clearly mountaintops are important to Matthew. All the good stuff in his gospel happens up here, largely we think, because Matthew wanted his readers to understand that Jesus is the new Moses, and all the good stuff happened to Moses when he was on the top of a mountain. There he encountered God face to face, received the Ten Commandments, was enveloped by a luminous cloud as we heard in the Exodus reading, and we learn later in Exodus that his face also was transfigured. In fact, Moses’s skin was changed to such a radiant, dazzling white that he had to wear a veil when he spoke to people afterward. Some very “wild and crazy” stuff was going on up on those mountaintops!

And, apparently, it isn’t just Moses and Jesus who have had these kind of experiences because a lot of people speak of exhilarating spiritual and life-changing moments as “mountain top experiences.” Maybe you’ve had one or two of in your own life. They might

not have been on top of actual mountains and your appearance might not have been altered, but you might feel that way. For you, the experience changed everything about you—the way you saw things, how you felt about yourself and those closest to you, what direction your life took, how you understood God and your relationship with God.

And this week I started thinking maybe that's exactly what was going on with Jesus in this story of Transfiguration.

This has always been a baffling story for me. We read a version of it every year on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. It serves as some kind of transition from the season of Epiphany to the season of Lent. The story is included in three of the four gospels, always near the middle of the book. And, most importantly, always immediately after Peter makes his confession of faith. In case you don't remember exactly how that goes, let me remind you. One day while Jesus is traveling with his disciples, he turns and asks them, "Who do people say I am?" They give all sorts of answers, and then Jesus says, "But who do *you* say that I am?" The only one with enough chutzpah to speak up is Peter who declares, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus says, "Somehow you got it right, Peter," and then he goes on to explain that as the Son of God he will have to suffer and die and then rise again. Peter takes issue with this, even rebuking Jesus. And in turn Jesus says him, "Get behind me Satan. That is not godly talk." He then goes on to tell his disciples that those who follow him will need to be ready to lay down their lives as well. And then the next story is about Jesus, Peter, James, and John climbing up a mountain where they meet Elijah and Moses and see Jesus transformed and hear the voice of God saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" We know we've heard these words before, and in fact, they are same words that God says at Jesus' baptism. The baptism where Jesus' identity, and our identities, are revealed. Baptism when we learn who he is and who we are: beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased.

So, with that in mind, I started wondering why it was important for Jesus and the disciples to hear those words again at this point. Why is this story told at the "climax," or high point, of the narrative? You probably remember from English class how the plot of a story starts with an introduction, followed by the rising action or unfolding conflict until it reaches the climax, the falling action, and the resolution or denouement, the big reveal. Funny how the gospels are written that way and I bet none of their authors ever took an English class.

So this story of transfiguration is the turning point. It literally happens at the apex of the mountain. And the conflict leading up to this has been about who Jesus is and what a Messiah actually does. Peter, who speaks for a lot of people, says it's not about suffering and dying and rising again, but God says it is. Who knows, maybe even Jesus was wrestling with this idea, as author Nikos Kazantzakis suggested in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Or maybe it was just Jesus' inner circle. At any rate what I've decided, at least this week, is that this story is all about Jesus' identity. Here he is identified once again as God's Beloved Child, and from here he comes down the mountain and makes his way to Jerusalem where he will indeed suffer and die and he rises again. And we read this story

right before Lent starts, because now we have six weeks to prepare ourselves for that suffering, death, and resurrection.

And as I started thinking about all of this, I thought about this congregation being in a time of transition. And I was also hearing news reports about what our national and state governments are doing to make transgender people's lives more difficult, riskier, scarier. And I thought, isn't it interesting that Jesus' identity is revealed in trans-figuration, transformation, tran-sition? What might that say to us at this juncture in our congregation's life and in life of the world around us?

Some of you know that before I started my ministry here I spent ten years as the director of a program that prepared people who could not go to seminary for ministry. A lot of people started that program thinking that the most important thing they could do before going into ministry was to know the Bible. I was quick to tell them what I had learned—in seminary and in my own ministry--was that the most important thing they needed to do was to know themselves, to really understand who they were and what they believed. And I discovered over those ten years that the people who knew themselves best, who had spent a lot of time and energy really exploring their identities, were the LGBTQ students, especially the one transgender participant. Peter Marty said it isn't just "the odd" and weak folks who are on identity quests, but it seems to me that when you don't conform to society's norms, when you feel like other people can't possibly understand who you are, you are much more likely, whether you want to or not, to really wrestle with your identity so that at least you can answer the question, "Who am I?". And, if we can believe the Bible, it is in those wrestling matches that new life and transformation happen. Think of Jacob wrestling with God all night until both identities were revealed. (Genesis 32)

In that January issue of *The Christian Century* nine transgender people, including clergy, economists, and biologists, reflected on their own struggles. Carla Robinson, an Episcopal priest, wrote about how hard it was to come out as trans while in seminary. She lost her position as an intern, her income, her friends, her church home, and she says "almost my faith....It felt like death. But God never let go." She knew she had to find a way to make sense of her old life as she moved into the new one. She writes: "I didn't have to go far to find that way. I found it in Jesus. At the heart of the gospel is Christ's death and resurrection. In baptism a person becomes a part of Jesus' death and resurrection. I began to look at my transition as a baptismal story. I began to use the language of death and resurrection to talk about my life. Being trans and passing through transition helped me understand that death and resurrection is the way Christians move through the world. It is the pattern of our lives" (p 23).

Maybe you've had one of those trans-figuration moments in your life. Maybe it was on a mountaintop, or at a "thin place" like Iona Abbey. Maybe it was while you wrestled all night long with God, hoping and praying that you could be someone different, that you didn't have to live the life that seemed inevitable you. Maybe it was at some point during this congregation's time of transition as we are moving from one way of being church to a way that has yet-to-be-revealed. If so, I hope that part of your experience has included realizing that being Jesus' disciples involves letting go, dying, laying down one's life. But

that is so you can experience resurrection, new life, transformation. And, more than anything, I hope that you know that your true identity is as God's beloved child who is well pleased with you, that you are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139), and that you rest secure in God's hand.