

Rev. Janet Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 19, 2023
Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9
Sermon: Into the Clouds

The Wizard of Oz is a good story and one that's stood the test of time. There's a scene in The Wizard of Oz in which Dorothy, the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion encounter the "real" wizard. The giant screen has shown a powerful, larger-than-life person whose booming voice rings out across Emerald City. Toto, Dorothy's dog, pulls back the curtain, however, and everyone finds that the wizard is just a man. It's all showbiz, lights and amplification. His cry of "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" falls on deaf ears. When the curtain is pulled back, he is seen for what he is.

In our text today about the Transfiguration of Jesus, the curtain is pulled back and Jesus is seen for who he is, too. Unlike the Wizard of Oz, though, Jesus is far more than just a man. Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John, and "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him" (vs. 2-3). These three disciples saw the curtain pulled back for Jesus and they were awed by his glory and power. It was so great they fell to the ground in fear.

Pulling back the curtain showed the disciples, and us, just who Jesus is.

In Chapter 16 of Matthew, before the Transfiguration, Jesus asks the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (16:16). Jesus blesses Peter and tells the disciples to tell no one. He then tells them that he must suffer and die. Jesus also begins to teach them that discipleship involves a cross. Chapter 16 of Matthew then establishes Jesus' identity, mission and his method.

This Sunday we step from the season of Epiphany into Lent. We move from the celebration of the light of Jesus' birth to the darkness of sin as we journey to Jerusalem and to the cross with Jesus. It is a time to reflect on our relationship with Jesus and a time of the cleansing of

our souls and to cut away and peel away the sin and darkness in our lives to give way to the glorious light of God's forgiveness and grace.

If we stay alert, during this season of Lent, we can navigate through the brokenness and sinfulness of our own lives because we walk in the path of the one who goes before us, carrying our cross. To be honest, Lent can be a difficult journey of self-examination. On February 22, we will have our Ash Wednesday Service to begin that period of honest examination as we receive the mark of the ashes and the sign of repentance.

Three disciples, Peter, James, and John, accompany Jesus to the mountain. The three disciples will not appear again as the inner circle until Gethsemane (26:37). There they will accompany Jesus as he struggles through the night that culminates with his arrest. (Matthew 26:36)

The Transfiguration and Gethsemane are the two most intimate experiences that Jesus shares with his disciples, and the same three disciples witness both.

Up on the mountain top, the disciples will see Elijah and Moses and hear the voice of God from the cloud. What an experience this must have been for these three men! It says, "He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as the light."

We get the word "metamorphosis" from the Greek word "Metemorphothe" which means to change, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. When Jesus shone like this it was a reminder to the disciples of the story when Moses had his encounter with God on the mountain and Moses' face shone so brightly that the people were frightened, and Moses had to wear a veil over his face. (Exodus 34: 29-35)

Why Moses and Elijah? These two men symbolize the coming of the messianic age, and their conversation with Jesus confirms him clearly as the Messiah whom they have been waiting for. Moses represents the Law and Elijah the prophets, and they are two of the most important Old Testament figures. We don't know what conversation happened between Jesus and Moses and Elijah in this account in Matthew, but in the Gospel of Luke, he says that they speak

about Jesus' departure which he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem, which is a reference to his death.

Peter, being a man of action, wants to do something, so he offers to make three tents for them. That sounds like something many of us would offer to do. We want to help and do something instead of just enjoying the moment and watching what is happening. Peter, like us, is comfortable with being busy. It is a way of gaining control in an out-of-control situation. There is a time for action and a time for prayer. This is a time for prayer and observation.

It is in the clouds, on the mountain, that God reveals Jesus as his son—the beloved—as he did at Jesus' baptism. Jesus is the one in whom God is well pleased, the one who teaches with God's authority, the one to whom we must listen. The disciples hear God's voice. Its message is directed at them. The voice came, telling them to pay attention, and the disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground. Suddenly, they felt a gentle hand touching them and reassuring them and it was Jesus. Jesus' touch is like no other! It has the power to heal and to move mountains. They saw no one now except Jesus. What else could you possibly need after an experience like that. Jesus told them, "Don't be afraid." Jesus wanted the disciples to trust him and to put their life in his hands just like he wants us to do.

He wants us to look up out of our busy and sometimes chaotic world and see only him and know his touch and to listen to him.

"As they went back down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Timing is important. Once Jesus is revealed publicly as Messiah, things will move quickly. Jesus has work to do yet, and that work will be interrupted if he is revealed too early.

The disciples do not yet understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus told them that he will suffer and die in Jerusalem, but the disciples do not understand. Only after the resurrection will the memory of the Transfiguration on the mountain be recalled. Only after the resurrection will the disciples be able to proclaim Christ as Savior and Messiah because it is then they will understand him.

The truly amazing thing is how quickly the disciples forget what happened on the mountain. Peter, James and John have seen Jesus revealed in glory, but their courage will fail them at the cross. Peter, who wanted to build the tents, denies Jesus three times in the courtyard. There is a lesson for us here as well. We have experienced the hand of God in our lives, but we find faith difficult when troubled times come our way.

The Transfiguration calls us forward with a vision of the future and the promised glory of the Lord's Second Coming. All creation can look forward in joy to the reconciliation of humanity with God in eternity.

As we come to worship the Lord together in this sanctuary we can say like Peter, "Lord, it's wonderful for us to be here!" Worship can be a mountain top experience with the Lord where we are refreshed in mind, body, and soul. It is in worship that we come together as the Body of Christ to be strengthened to go out into the world.

The story of the Transfiguration also points us down the mountain and invites us to walk with Jesus into the suffering, hungry, hurting people of the world. The voice of God commands us to listen to Jesus and to obey. Jesus will be with us always, even as we go to the ends of the earth.

As we begin this Season of Lent, remember when Jesus came down the mountain, it was the beginning of his journey to the cross. Over the next weeks of Lent, let us journey with our Savior and listen to him.