

Text: Matthew 17: 1-9
Title: Jesus in the Light
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Back in the day.... I was a high school teacher and I taught a church history course inherited from one of the finest teachers I've ever known ~ Roger Griffioen. He loved students and he loved his discipline and he expected the very best out of both.

Griffioen taught church history by employing the image of a tree; I copied Griffioen. The Christian church is like a tree that grew up throughout history ~ and from the sturdy substantial trunk of the tree there are branches that grew out ~ Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant branches ~ and the Protestant branch splintered into thousands of smaller branches and twigs ~ and each split was over something cultural, or something theological, or something political, or something.....

And after examining the reasons and distinctions of each branch the class would go on a field trip to visit a local example. We went to Irish Catholic churches, and German Lutheran churches, and Greek Orthodox churches, and wham-bam thank-you Jesus! Fire-breathin' Bible-belivin' Holy Spirit-siezin' hallelujah-screamin' American Pentecostal churches.

The Greek Orthodox churches often elicited the most puzzled interest. There was something holy, something wholly other, that engaged students. There were smells and bells and candles and colors and gold and thrones and secrets and light and shadow and mystery.... And, something about it made everybody whisper.

The walls and the high domed ceiling were covered with icons ~ beautiful, brilliantly painted images of prophets, priests, patriarchs, kings, apostles, and disciples. Created according to rules handed down from generation to generation, icons are not meant to be pictures that represent the person in the way that the Mona Lisa represents a young woman with a quirky smile, nor are they abstractions or cartoon characterizations....

Rather, icons are meant to be visible representations of invisible realities,
they are meant to be windows to the kingdom of heaven,
they are meant to pull us into the image to see beyond the image,
they are meant to be a glimpses of something divine.

In that way icons are not just decorations or paintings of biblical history, but they are visible symbols of spiritual realities. And, as we sat in the Orthodox sanctuary everywhere we looked there were icons;
we were surrounded by a cloud of witnesses,
we were part of the company of the saints in light,
and somehow (at least in iconic theory) the eternal was touching the temporal....

You can imagine that as a ham-bun and Jello-salad Protestant I didn't know what to make of it, but I can tell you that I felt like I was missing out on something. Even, as a cynical-doubting-wrestling-Christian-rationalist there was a transcendent mystery that tugged at me.

Henri Nouwen says that the transfiguration ~ our text this morning ~ functions as an icon. That's not to dump the text into the metaphor bin nor read it as woodenly literal history, but it is to suggest that the transfiguration has a luminous iconic quality. There is some access here through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible.

The transfiguration scene has a cinematic feel that stirs your inner Steven Spielberg: Jesus leads a hike with three trusted friends up a rugged rocky mountain, to a high place where the membrane between heaven and earth is thin, and there his face begins to shine like the sun, his clothes become whiter than white, and time morphs as well ~ for Moses and Elijah, each of different centuries, appear, not as silent apparitions, but as partners in conversation with this blazing Jesus.

And for comedic relief, bumbling blustery Peter wants to mark the moment with tents or tabernacles. Only to have it all swallowed up in a bright cloud that thunders the voice of God.

And their knees give way and they melt into the ground. The King James Version has it that they "sore afraid." Afraid to look, afraid to speak, afraid to breath, afraid to believe, afraid to be...

And then just as suddenly as the veil was pulled back ~ it closes ~ and Jesus walks over, stoops down, gently puts his hands on their shoulders, and whispers, "Get up. Don't be afraid"

Stunned and staggered they unscrunch their eyes, wipe the blur away, and look around for some mist, or some flakes of light, or some singed bush. Even the faint smell of a holy smoke would help.

For, how do they make sense of what they just saw?
How will they explain it to their friends?
How will they explain it to themselves?

We explain it by saying that the transfiguration in Matthew ~ the most Jewish of the gospels ~ is written to illumine the continuation of God's activity through the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. And on this mountain of transfiguration there is what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "the Mount Rushmore of heaven -- the Lawgiver, the Prophet, and the Messiah -- wrapped in such glory it is a wonder the other three could see them at all." And with Technicolor proclamation, Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean, is unmistakably the new Moses, the Anointed of God, the Messiah, and the fulfillment of every last jot and title of the law and the prophets.

We explain it by saying that the transfiguration is a mountain top proclamation of identity before Jesus makes his way toward a harsh hill top outside Jerusalem.

But, is there another way to get at it?

The question last week was “Where do you expect to encounter God?” It was a way to look at the movement of Jesus away from center-stage Palestine to the margins, to where people were, “sitting in darkness,...sitting in the land of the shadow of death.” And I suggested that we encounter God when we’re at our weakest, stretched our farthest, short on answers, and at a loss. We encounter God in the dark.

Well, let’s sit with that question again this week.

It is an honest question for me because I don’t have a catalogue of confident encounters with God. I don’t know that I have heard his voice, or seen his face, or felt his presence in an unmistakable self-authenticating way. But, I know that I long to encounter God. I know that I long to see even an image, even an icon of God...

Where do you expect to encounter God?

Scripture teaches that we’re created in the image of God, so it seems to me that we must bear some vestige, some imprint of God. We must be able to see some reflection of the image of God in people. But, in a world where terrorists strap bombs to women with Down’s Syndrome, send them into crowded marketplaces, detonate those bombs from a distance, and kill almost a hundred and maim countless others.... In a world where a man walks into a woman’s clothing store and murders five innocent shoppers...

In that kind of world it is hard to believe that there is any vestige of the image of God left. If you are looking for the image of God in people ~ that image is smudged, scarred, perverted, and at times profoundly unrecognizable.

Where do you expect to encounter God?

The transfiguration functions as an icon ~ illumining the face of God. If you want to see God look in the face of Jesus. If you want to see divinity it is pushing through the surface of Jesus. God is shining through his skin. We encounter God in that light. For, in Jesus, the image of God is not smudged, not diluted, not diminished, and not defective, but clear, unmistakable, and self-authenticating.

I don’t know where else to look to see God as clearly.

And, if God is clearly illumined when Jesus’ face is glowing, then God is just as clearly illumined, when Jesus touches his friend’s shoulders and they look up from the dirt to see his familiar face flat ~ with no residual glowing.

God is clearly illumined when Jesus looks over Jerusalem and weeps.
God is clearly illumined when Jesus teaches.
God is clearly illumined when Jesus breaks bread with friends.
God is clearly illumined when Jesus suffers on the cross.
God is clearly illumined when Jesus breaths his last.

Dear friends, there is that odd moment midstream in the transfiguration when Peter is hollering into the light about building tabernacles or tents. And we surmise that, while there is another reference here to Jewish history, what Peter really wants to do is capture the moment. He wants to capture this clear image of God shining in the face of Jesus.

But, the “true folly” (Scott Hoezee) of Peter’s suggestion is that what he wants to capture has been with him from the very first day that Jesus walked up to his fishing boat.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John the same word for tenting or dwelling is used to describe God’s presence in the Word made flesh. There was no need to build a tent; God had set up his tent in the flesh of Jesus.

And, so we keep coming back to look for God ~
in the face of Jesus,
in the teaching of Jesus,
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,
in the baptism of Jesus,
in the sacramental memory of Jesus,
in the community of Jesus.

And whether in church or classroom or funeral home or operating table or AA meeting or lonely restless night,
if you are looking for God,
if you expect to encounter God ~ look to Jesus.

In the words of Fleming Rutledge:

Even as the preacher stands before you bent and crippled by sin like the all the rest of humanity, the message is that the light of redemption has dawned upon us all in the journey of the Son of God through death into life. It is true on the brilliant days but even more true on the cloudy ones when faith is tested and hope is nearly dead: the very glory of God shines in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. He dies and he shines for you.

Get up. Don’t be afraid.

Amen.