

WELCOME! Now Go HOME.

Sermon, February 11, 2018

Transfiguration Sunday

Texts: Mark 9:2-10; II Peter 1:16-19

After worship the Sunday of the 2011 Labor Day weekend, I zoomed to TF Green Airport, parked in Garage C, ran to the main entrance and up the escalator stairs to security, and boarded a USAir flight to Philadelphia just minutes before they shut the door to the gate. Arriving in Philadelphia, I rented a car and raced down I-95 south thirty miles to Wilmington, DE and arrived at the downtown Marriott hotel about one half hour before the start of my nephew's wedding being held there. It was a beautiful ceremony, and afterward I was so thoroughly enjoying my time at the reception with family and acquaintances, excellent food, a great band and some fun dancing that I almost lost track of time. I looked at my watch, jumped to my feet (*and nearly out of my skin!*), said my goodbyes, kissed my mother and sisters and sisters-in-law and cousins and my new niece-in-law and dashed down to the parking garage to my rental car, zoomed back up I-95 N to the airport in order to catch my 10:45 PM flight home. I arrived at the Hertz rental a little before ten o'clock, and not wanting to wait for the shuttle bus, I sprinted across the parking garages and access roads because I knew the airport well, heading for Terminal B.

However, when I ran up the Terminal B escalator to the security checkpoint, I was horrified to find the checkpoint was closed and nobody was around except for one lone security guard on patrol ... who informed me the security points in Terminals A, B, C and D all closed for the evening at 10:00 p.m., and I would have to go all the way down to the security checkpoint at Terminal E! This is a BIG airport, but at least it wasn't Terminal F ... if you have ever had to make a connection at Philadelphia, you may know that Terminal F is a loong way down, almost in another part of the city! So, I ran all the way down this cavernous, empty hallway lined with closed stores past Terminal C, past Terminal D and finally arrived at the TSA checkpoint of Terminal E huffing and puffing ... and I was the only passenger there, with six TSA agents all hanging about. I'm frantically kicking off my shoes, yanking off my belt, emptying my pockets and throwing everything into those gray bins, when I hear the call over the intercom, "*Dr. Stephen Clark, Dr. Stephen Clark, if you are in the airport terminal, please report to Gate 39 Terminal B right away.*" I pleaded to the six agents, "*That's me. I'm Dr. Clark! They're paging me! Where is the intercom phone so I can return the page?*" Well, they all shrugged their shoulders ... "*We don't work for the airport. We don't know.*" Meanwhile, they're all wearing walkie-talkie radios, but not wanting to perturb them and potentially cause delay to my processing, I just buttoned my lip and submitted to the drill. They were kind enough to hurry me through the screening, and off I went running back down the cavernous hall past Terminals D and C, never bothering to put my belt or shoes back on. I'm tired, it's been a very long day, my knee hurt, my feet hurt, I'm lugging my carry-on, my pants are falling down (*I'm carrying the belt!*) I'm huffing and puffing and worrying that at my age I may be a prime candidate for cardiac arrest, and I arrive at Terminal B find that gate 39 is all the way at the very end of that terminal hallway!

I huff and puff down the terminal and about half way down, coming in my direction, is a man about my size in a white shirt with a USAir logo looks at me intently and says, "*Rev. Clark?*" I responded, "*YES! That's me.*" With a Texas drawl, he said "*Take your time, sir, you're OK, the plane won't leave without you.*" I assumed he was a steward or perhaps a ticket agent; the man was confident, calming, reassuring, and absolutely sure the plane wouldn't leave. I then asked if I had time to put my belt and shoes back on; he laughed and assured me again the plane would wait. In fact, he was positively certain the plane would not leave and that I would make it home to TF Green ... because, as I learned, this man was the plane's CAPTAIN! He told me he saw my name and title on the passenger manifest (*I had checked in on line*), and with a twinkle in his eye he added that in his devotional time that morning, he read in Proverbs, "*And thou shall never take off without the Reverend on board.*" I don't know what translation of the Bible he was reading, but I didn't care ... all I knew was I was going to make it home, because the *pilot* was walking with me! Well, it may be stretching the analogy a bit, but in our Gospel account of the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John are given a glimpse of the Pilot of their souls as He really is in His majestic glory. Whatever transpires along the way in the difficult weeks ahead on the difficult journey to Jerusalem, this scene today should convince them the Pilot of their souls will be walking with them no matter what, and He will eventually take them Home.

Peter writes of this in our Epistle reading we opened worship with today. "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to Him."* We are eyewitnesses of the majesty of Jesus Christ, Peter writes, specifically referring to the event recorded in our Gospel reading. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus' face "shone like the sun," His clothes "became as white as the light," (*which is reminiscent of Psalm 104:2, when the Psalmist describes God as one Who " ... wraps Himself in light as with a garment."*) and Moses and Elijah appeared with Him, and we are told in Luke's account they were talking about what will be happening in the days ahead. And then a cloud enveloped the disciples, and God's voice sounded from the cloud and said, "*This is my Son, whom I love; Listen to him!*"

Peter reiterates emphatically, "*We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*" Peter writes this letter knowing that his time on earth was short and that his readers in Rome were facing many dark difficulties and very real dangers in the persecution to come. In the midst of whatever may come, Peter reminds them, our faith in Jesus Christ is not grounded on myths or clever stories; it's *real!* You can be certain of that! It is based on the sure revelation from God. And he refers specifically to this scene from the Gospels, the Transfiguration, which seems to have been a defining moment for these disciples. I'm sure the vivid memory of this experience kept them going through some very dark times. In this moment on the Mount, Jesus confirmed Peter's confession made eight days earlier, thus erasing all remaining doubt as to who He might be. He also confirmed He would have to go by way of the Cross, that there will be betrayal and rejection and suffering and death, but on the other side of all this He would be raised in eternal life and glory. Yes, He was going suffer; but Yes, all would be well. I think Jesus took Peter and James and John up onto the mountain with Him because He wanted to give them something to remember and to hold onto when times got tough.

And, this is almost another sermon, things will always get tough in the rough and tumble of living in a fallen world ... there will be betrayals, there will be sufferings, there will be disappointments and failings. A quote I read in preparation for our Ash Wednesday service sums it up well, "*There is no Eden without a serpent.*" There's always going to be something causing things to go wrong, no matter how "perfect" the paradise on earth may seem. But on that mountain these disciples are given a glimpse into how it will all turn out. He wanted to assure them He knew what He was doing in the very real difficulties and trials and sufferings to come. Moses and Elijah are there to confirm it. By being given this intense experience they can now see that no matter what they may have to endure, no matter what difficulties they will face, the story will turn out well. Another quick point: Glorious as the transfiguration experience was, I think it's significant to note that God didn't speak at all during it. When did He speak? He spoke *afterwards*. He spoke from the cloud which followed the experience, the cloud which enveloped and overshadowed the amazed, confused, dazed disciples. Clouds so often follow life's wonderful and glorious moments, don't they? Sometimes they are dark, difficult, even stormy clouds. So often after the "highs" come the realities and fears and doubts of the "lows." And sometimes the clouded lows seem to go on forever. But it was in the *cloud* the disciples discovered God. It was in the cloud the disciples heard the voice of God. It was while they were covered in cloud, disorientated, unable to see clearly, that God spoke to them and told them to *LISTEN TO JESUS*. The cloud is where God is encountered. That is where genuine faith takes root. That is where the intensity of previous religious experience takes on real meaning ... and where we learn, really learn, to listen to Jesus.

You know, when Peter witnessed this Transfiguration, he wanted to set up dwellings and stay there. It seems he just wanted to dwell in perpetual spiritual clarity. But he could not do so. Jesus wouldn't let him. He had to go back down the mountain. They all had to go back down the mountain, back to the valleys and plains of life and work. But they descended inspired with a quiet knowledge and utter confidence in their hearts that the Hope is real. They descended with a quiet knowledge and confidence that they had been given a very special gift ... a glimpse at the end-result of God's salvation. Spiritual experiences can and do come to us. Many, if not all of us, have experienced defining moments when we sense the very presence of God, when we "see" the glory of God. Wonderful and joyful as these moments are, they do not last, do they? We'd love to hang onto them, we'd love to dwell in that perpetual spiritual clarity, but Jesus won't let us, either. The transience of these moments is not always our fault. The fleeting nature of the highs of joyful experience are not some kind of sign of lack of faith. It is the pattern of Transfiguration: a glimpse of glory ... followed by a return to the cloudy paths of discipleship. God gives us a glorious taste of what IS; then God says, "**Welcome. Enjoy it. Now go home. Get back to work.**"

May 2010 I was in San Diego to perform the wedding of David and Sojin Lim's (*former Greenwood members*) daughter, Marion. There was a bumper sticker on a car there in San Diego that gave me a chuckle: "*Welcome to San Diego. Now go home.*" This not so subtle hint by this resident of San Diego was "*Welcome. Enjoy our sights and sounds, even leave some of your money here, but don't stay here. It's already too crowded.*" In a way, that's one of the subtle messages of this Gospel passage. "*Welcome! Now go home.*" There are two dimensions to the Christian life: the mountain of exultation and the valley of service. The mountain where we encounter God, where we feel our souls refreshed, where we find a new motivation for the living of our lives. And the valley where we maintain and carry out our responsibilities. In fact, the only kind of mountaintop experience worth having is one that leads us down from the mountain of exultation on into the valley of service. Any other type of mountaintop experience is bogus.

I always hope you receive a blessing from our worship service. I always hope the music and the prayers and the fellowship bring you closer to God than you have ever been before. But no offense, I don't want you to stay here. There are people outside these walls who need your love and your witness of faith and your encouragement; they need to know the vision of Christ you hopefully have experienced here. After each benediction we are sent to follow Jesus Christ into the valley of service, to be a blessing to others while all the time walking with our Pilot.

Welcome! Now go home.