

BE THERE AND BE SQUARE

Sermon, February 23, 2020

Transfiguration Sunday

Texts: Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9, II Peter 1:16-21

The sermon title “*Be there AND be square*” is a bit of an adaption of the saying from the late fifties/early sixties, “*Be there OR be square.*” “Be there or be square” implies if one isn’t there, if one does not attend a certain event, one is “square” as in not “cool,” boring, not with it. (*The Urban Dictionary has a different take on it: “Be there or be square means that if you’re not there, you’re being a square, because you’re not a-round, man.”*) This idiomatic use of the word “square” is thought to have originated in the fifties/early sixties “beatnik” era, referring to people who are boring, or who are out of touch with current trends and attitudes, who can’t go “outside the box” who are “uncool.” Prior to this, the idiomatic use of the word square mainly had a good meaning, it referred to sound-ness, honesty ... a square guy was someone who was good, right, solid, trustworthy, dependable. A square meal was a well-rounded (*to mix geometrical metaphors*) meal, a substantial and solid meal. A square deal was a fair and equal deal. To square off against someone was to muster all your strength and posture and stature to stand firmly as one could against an opponent. When you settled your debts, you squared them. A square is a geometrical figure with four equal sides and four right angles ... there is a lot about a square that is right, straight, good and strong; it lines up, it’s symmetrical, it’s true. It’s on the level and it’s plumb straight. In this sense, being a disciple of Jesus Christ is about being square ... it’s about being THERE for Jesus, and being SQUARE in one’s devotion ... faithful, good, right, true, strong, trustworthy.

We just read in the Gospel text for this Transfiguration Sunday, “*After six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John ...*” Six days after ... what? Does anybody remember (*without looking*)? All three Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration¹ precede the narrative with this event; we talked about this a few times in years past. Six days ago, Jesus had asked His disciples what people were saying about Him. In response, Peter, made this memorable confession ... the first Apostles’ Creed ... “*You are the Christ, the son of the Living God.*” Now, that was one of those crescendo moments in the entire New Testament, a real high point of insight, revelation, and inspiration. Peter confesses, he puts into words, what all the disciples have come to realize ... that they have been actually walking and talking and sharing life these past few years with God in the flesh, the Christ, the long hoped for Messiah! I could well imagine Peter following up that confession with these words: “*Jesus, you are the Man! We have seen you in action! You are the One Who can make things happen; You are the One we’ve been waiting for!*” Understandably, Peter had high hopes and great expectations for what Jesus would do.

And then, to Peter’s astonishment, Jesus began talking about suffering and going to a cross and being killed. Peter responded, “No, Lord!” (*Which, by the way, is something of an oxymoron ... You can’t say “No” and “Lord” in the same breath ... if He really is your Lord, then you’re not going to say “No” to Him ... but that’s another sermon.*) “*No, Lord! This will never happen to you!*” Peter was a man of action, a “can do” kind of guy. He believed the whole point of having a Savior was to avoid things like suffering and hardship and crosses. Peter had a lot invested in this; he has left his home, his work and has committed all he has to Jesus. Many of us can identify, at least in part, with the raw emotion Peter must have been experiencing. Many of you know what it is to have invested time, love, energy, devotion and emotion in someone ... a child, a friend, a spouse, a mentor ... and all of a sudden the one in whom you have invested so much love, time, energy and devotion just seems hell-bent on a path of personal destruction. It rips your heart out; it tears you apart. You just want to grab them and say, “*No! What are you doing? Stop! Don’t head down this destructive path!*” Well, that’s Peter!

As I’ve pointed out in years past, Peter was a “FAT” disciple. He was Faitiful, Available, Teachable ... FAT ... all excellent qualities of an honest and honorable follower of Jesus, a “square” disciple. We know Peter is **F**, **Faithful**. He loves Jesus; he’s loyal, in fact, he’s the first to recognize and acknowledge Jesus’ identity and divinity. Peter is also **A**, **Available**; we know he has dropped everything and has committed himself to following Jesus where He leads. To him, that’s what it meant to be a disciple, to always be there *with* Jesus, and to always be there *for* Jesus. According to that “great theologian” ... Woody Allen ... 80% of success in life comes from just showing up; it is about faithfully being there. Sometimes it seems so much easier NOT to show up, especially when things get difficult. But responsible and dependable and trustworthy people do show up; success is often about just being there, being in the right place at the right time when things happen. And in the Christian life, it’s not just about being there, but it’s also about staying there, staying with it, each step of the way. It’s about F, faithfulness and A, availability.

¹ John, one of the disciples on hand for this event, did not include a full account of this event in his Gospel account. However, many believe it was this event to which John refers when he writes in John 1:14 – “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, Who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*”

It was on the night Jesus was betrayed Peter made his infamous denial about being a disciple. I'm in a minority on this, but I think Peter denied being a disciple not because of fear or fecklessness, I think he denied being a disciple because of his *integrity*. "Are you a disciple?" he was asked. "No! I am not a disciple of Jesus!" he responded, and I could imagine him adding, "Not anymore." To Peter, on that dark night, that was his honest, square response. He knew Jesus was going to the cross, and he knew he would not follow Him there. After all, what would be the point? It would be fruitlessly suicidal. And this man, who had often proven himself to be a square disciple, knew that if you're not willing to follow Jesus Christ, then *by definition* you are no longer a disciple ... so, he may have reasoned, quit calling yourself what you are not! If you are not being a disciple of Jesus, then don't claim to be one. When Peter realized he was not being a disciple, he had the integrity and the honor to say so; he would not pretend to be someone he wasn't. He was a square guy, in the good sense of that idiom. This was, of course, before the resurrection; when it became clear to Peter that death is not the end, when he came to understand things he had not understood before, Peter was restored as a disciple. Like all disciples of Jesus, Peter doesn't always understand everything about Jesus at first ... especially when Jesus talks about such things as hardship and suffering and bearing crosses ... but eventually, he does, because he is faithful, available and teachable.

So, back to our reading. It was six days after that original confession that Jesus invites Peter along with James and John, two other "F.A.T. and square" disciples, to come with Him to this mountain. When they get there, Jesus then appears as a more glorious figure than they could have ever imagined. We sing at Christmas, "*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the Incarnate Deity*" ... well, for this brief, shining moment, the human veil of God incarnate was peeled back a bit. We are told that, "*His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light. Just then, there appeared before them Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus.*" This is what Peter was hoping for, this was BIG! This was the biggest Jesus yet! Maybe Peter's thinking, "*Rather than all this talk about suffering and sacrifice and hardship, THIS is the kind of Jesus people will respond to ... bright, shiny, attractive, powerful, hanging out with Moses and Elijah!*" Peter even suggests putting up shelters so they can stay there and make the most of the moment, but suddenly they are enveloped in a cloud, just as Moses was centuries earlier, and the voice of God speaks audibly, "*THIS IS MY SON, WHOM I LOVE ... LISTEN TO HIM!*"

Note it is *then* that the disciples become afraid; they fall on their faces in fear. Jesus aglow, Jesus the miracle man ... that impressed them, but didn't seem to frighten them. But the voice of God, that's something else! And I don't think it's just the Voice that terrified them; I think it's what the Voice was commanding. "*LISTEN TO MY SON! LISTEN TO HIM calling you to a new understanding of how it is. LISTEN TO HIM calling you to a higher and better way to live. LISTEN TO HIM as He calls you to follow where He leads. Listen to Him Who may have some hard things to say to you, because His words are good and they are for your good! Listen to Him; trust this One Who is talking about leading you places you may not want to go.*" We are then told that as they are on their faces in fear and terror, Jesus came, touched them and said, "*Get up. Get up, don't be afraid; let's go!*"

Peter writes of this experience in our Epistle reading 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."* Peter reiterates, "*We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*" Peter wrote this letter knowing that his time on earth was short and that his first century readers, mainly the Christians residing in Rome, were facing many dark difficulties and dangers in the persecution about to come. Peter says to them, in the midst of whatever they may be facing, that our faith in Jesus Christ is not grounded in myths or clever stories or specious hopes; it's *real!* And then he refers specifically to this Transfiguration scene. In this moment on the Mount, Jesus confirmed Peter's earlier confession, erasing any doubt as to who He might be. He also confirmed He would have to go by way of the Cross, by way of 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, hard times are coming. Yes, He was going to suffer; but Yes, all would be well ... this is all part of the divine Plan. On that mountain Peter and James and John are given a glimpse into how it will all turn out. On that mountain it was clear Jesus knew what He was doing; Moses and Elijah were even on hand to confirm it. By faithfully being there with Jesus, these disciples were given this glimpse of glory that helped them to see that no matter what they may have to endure, it will turn out well.

I close with this: The Rev. Richard C. Halverson was the pastor of the prestigious Fourth Presbyterian Church of Bethesda, Maryland for twenty-three years; a number of powerbrokers and statesmen of Washington, D.C. were part of that congregation. He went on to serve thirteen years as the United States Senate Chaplain until 1994, the year before he passed away at age 79 in 1995. I actually ate dinner with him and a family from that Bethesda church in 1978 or 79; that's a bit of funny story I may tell you about some other time, but not now. I'm told that throughout Rev. Halverson's time in Bethesda he used this weekly benediction to encourage all the disciples of that congregation to faithfully be where they are called to be and to serve where they were called to serve:

"Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there; He has a purpose in your being there. Christ who indwells you has something He wants to do through you where you are.
Believe this, and go in His grace and love and power."

Be there, AND be square. Amen.