



**The Creation of Adam**  
**Matthew 17:1-9**  
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Washington Street UMC  
February 26, 2017

Throughout the course of the year, there are some Sundays that stand apart as special, high holy days. Some of these high holy days receive a great amount of attention, and you will recognize them not only for their title, but you can likely also tell me the date on, or at least the season in which they take place.

For example – on Christmas Day we celebrate the birth of Christ. Christmas takes place on ... yes, you got it, December 25. Another easy one, at Easter we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Easter takes place when? Officially it takes place on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the March equinox. But you know more generally that Easter falls in later March or April.

But these are the easy high holy days; what other celebratory days do we have? We celebrate Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate Trinity Sunday as we celebrate the tri-fold nature of God. We celebrate Christ the King Sunday as we praise the kingship of Christ. We celebrate the baptism of Christ as God declares Christ is the Son of God. We celebrate Epiphany as God makes the revelation of Christ to the magi. And today is another one of those high holy days that, like Trinity and Christ the King Sundays, often gets overlooked. Today is Transfiguration Sunday.

Transfiguration Sunday is celebrated on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, leading us into the season of Lent, which does begin this week with Ash Wednesday.

The story of the transfiguration, which we heard read from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, is one of those odd stories in the Biblical text that doesn't seem to make much sense. In the attempt to find the historical Jesus, which many have undertaken, like the current show, *Finding Jesus*, whose second season begins next Sunday on CNN, I doubt you'll ever find a kernel of physical evidence, save the early manuscripts of scripture, that offers this event as a historical reality. We the reader, the faithful disciple, the seeking Christian, we are challenged to accept the transfiguration as either pious imagination, or to suspend what we know of reality and accept the event as recorded in the apostle's narrative. Regardless which view we take on the event, we must admit that such an event is beyond the possible reach of historical reconstruction or scientific verification.<sup>1</sup>

Because we will likely never grasp the physical reality of the event, the Transfiguration is perhaps at best understood as a vision of the disciples that is beyond our own capability of understanding.

It is a story best *understood* as being beyond our *understanding* – yes, that is what I said.

Because the event is so far down the realm of the impossible, when we as disciples read the story of the Transfiguration, and when we as preachers prepare to teach on the Transfiguration, we tend to focus on the actions of Peter. The vision of what happens to Christ is so far removed from our cognitive reality, we tend to focus on the actions of Peter because he makes sense to us. Peter is the one in the story with whom we relate most. Peter is the one who has proven to have flaws in his faith and discipleship, and so we connect with him. This is the Peter who, while seemingly lifted by God to walk on water, sank into the stormy sea at the first thought of failure. This is the Peter who rebuked Jesus just a few days before the Transfiguration when Jesus said his tenure as Messiah would end as a suffering servant. This is the same Peter who tried to refuse Jesus the opportunity to wash his feet at the Last Supper. This is the same Peter who pulled his sword on the Roman guards at the Garden of Gethsemane as they sought to arrest Jesus. This is the same Peter who denied Jesus three times on the night Jesus was tried and condemned to death in the Roman court.

We tend to focus in on what Peter says and does here because it reminds us of what we would likely say and do. It makes sense; it's rationale; it's believable; it's within the realm of possibilities. Peter is "the prototypical extrovert; he can't just take it all in but needs to say something, to do something, to offer something."<sup>ii</sup> Perhaps a focus on Peter is to be expected, for surely studying the human response to God can be helpful. Many a good sermon and biblical teaching focuses in on the actions of what people do when they encounter the unbelievable majesty of God.

Yet, I wonder, do we sometimes focus too much on the human response to God, and not enough on God's initiative toward us, humanity? Do we move rather quickly past the imaginative presentation of God in the biblical witness because it's too exceptional for our human minds to comprehend? Does sitting in awe of God make us uncomfortable because it highlights our own lack of power? Does falling to our knees in ultimate worship of God come too difficult because of our lack of humility and our unwillingness to admit a need for a Savior?

I don't think it's any wonder why Sundays like Trinity Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday, Epiphany Sunday, or Ascension Sunday get left behind and go largely unnoticed in many a Christian Church, while we would never leave out Sundays like Easter, Christmas, Pentecost, and All Saint's Day, which are each planned and scheduled with lofty celebrations? Just look at the focus of these days. At Easter, we celebrate the resurrection as it promises *us* new life; at Pentecost we celebrate the gift of the Spirit that empowers *us* in our walk; at All Saint's Day we celebrate the good work of *humanity*, hailing those who have come before us as saints; and Christmas ... Christmas is like a second birthday where we open up more gifts than we know where to store in the house.

But Trinity, Christ the King, Transfiguration, Epiphany, and Ascension Sundays – these days call for nothing short of our personal acknowledgement of how great *God* is. They call for total worship of the magnitude of *God*. They call for us to acknowledge we are nothing without the

gift of life given by the *Father*, the gift of new life made possible by the *Savior*, and the gift of life lived rightly made possible by the *Spirit*. They call for us to do nothing more and nothing less than sit in awe.

Christ is transfigured on the mountain top: he is enlightened with a glowing and shining light, his clothes become dazzling white, and on his left and on his right appear Moses and Elijah. This is about as high and holy a moment as one might encounter in their lifetime. This kind of vision of the great power of God and Christ doesn't come every day.

But Peter ... oh Peter ... he doesn't sit in awe and wonder. He speaks up, "Lord, I know what to do. I got this. I'm going to build a few booths – a few dwellings – that we might all stay here on this mountain top. One for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. I got this Lord." Perhaps Peter was the first Eagle Scout, he was prepared and ready to spring into action.

To be fair, before we degrade Peter too much, let's admit that Peter had a possible Biblical directive for his actions. Back in Zechariah, we are told about a Festival of Booths, during which the faithful would go to Jerusalem and worship God. Such a mandate was likely entrenched in Peter's mind, he likely knew the text in Zechariah, and knew there were great punishments for those who did not celebrate the Festival of Booths. ... But even as I try to provide a defense for Peter's actions, I feel dirty inside, as if I'm giving into the very sin that says we must always be doing something for Christ. And yes, I think it's a sin. I think it breaks the will of God to not find time to just sit in awe of the majesty of the Creator.

There are many examples of how God calls us to do nothing but sit in awe of the Almighty ... let me name a few for you: Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God." ... Exodus 14:14, "The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." ... Job 6:24, Job says, "Teach me, and I will be silent." ... Lamentations 3:26, "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." ... Isaiah 32:17, "The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness will be quietness and trust forever." ... Zechariah 2:13, "Be still, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling."

This story also supports that call by God, for seemingly before Peter can finish speaking, God's voice interrupts. Verse 5 says, "While Peter was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" There's some anger in the voice – God seems a bit perturbed that in the midst of one of the most awesome things ever done by God, Peter thinks it best to speak up and offer help. It's as if Peter doesn't understand the magnanimity of the event and thinks he can make the situation better.

God's voice is so forceful that the disciples fall to the ground and are they overcome by fear. Perhaps this is the right place for the disciples to be in such a moment. "The disciples [are driven] prostrate to the ground, which is always an appropriate posture before the Lord."<sup>iii</sup>

Again I say, there are times when God, our Creator, wants nothing more of us than for us to sit in reverent silence before the majesty of the Omnipresent and All-powerful God. “[Peter] is disposed to talk, but this is not a time for talking; it is a time for listening.”<sup>iv</sup> Peter is rebuked by God, who calls on the disciples to do nothing more than listen. Peter, in offering to build these dwellings, seemed to understand the powerful presence of God in that space. But his reaction is misdirected. Instead of falling to his knees in awe, he speaks up as if he can make the powerful transfiguration of Christ a more appropriate event by adding dwellings to the mountain top.

But there they are, the disciples are driven to the ground by the almighty voice of God. There they lay in fear, bowing before the King. This posture, this behavior, this response ... this is a most appropriate position to take before the Savior of the world. This is a most necessary position for one to take as one witnesses the grandeur of God. It is the posture we take at the kneeler in prayer before God, head bowed, knees on the ground, in the most appropriate of physical positions before the Almighty.

What happens next should not go unnoticed. Christ is transfigured, he’s there in majesty with Moses and Elijah ... Peter has offered to build a dwelling place and has been rebuked by God ... the disciples are now laying in fear before the transfigured Christ ... “But, Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

In awesome fear, lying before the transfigured Christ, the disciples received the touch of the hand of Christ, and they stood up and walked with him down the mountain side. What a mighty and powerful touch – that can wipe away all fear, even the fear of the Almighty. There’s power in touch. Truly, “Does anything banish our fears more perfectly than a simple touch?”<sup>v</sup>

From the hand on the shoulder of a patient about to undergo surgery, to the hug when a child boards the school bus for the first time, to the grasping of hands of a husband and wife at the center of the aisle, to the feel of the forehead when you’re sick, to the arm around your back when you’re standing at the graveside service ... there is power in the mighty touch of another. And how much more so is the power of the touch of God?

John Calvin, one of the great reformers, believed it was this touch of God that marked the genius of God. “God, who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them; God, whose greatness is so vast that not even the heavens above the heavens can contain it; God, whose we are, is so magnificent that God is willing to come among us to reach out, touch us, and still our fears.”<sup>vi</sup>

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Michelangelo painted the great work, *The Creation of Adam*. It depicts the mighty touch of God in the Genesis story as humanity was created. The painting, for over 600 years, has spoken to the heart of God. It speaks not only to the gift of life given by God in the beginning, but it points to the many stories in the Biblical witness where people yearned for the simple touch of God. From the man who was lowered through the thatch room that Christ might cure his inability to walk, to Zacchaeus who yearned just for the sight of Christ as he walked through town, to the woman who pushed her way through the crowds just to touch the

cloak of Christ, to Lazarus who needed just the voice of Christ to call him back to life ... the Biblical narrative is full of stories where the touch of God restores life, hope, comfort, and healing.

Throughout this upcoming season of Lent we will be exploring some of these stories, as we focus in on the replicated grace of God. We will be identifying examples of the times and places where God shows up, where the touch, voice, and power of God is revealed, even in situations when it may have been least expected.

I invite you, as we go through Lent this year, to show up and be prepared to sit in awe of the glory of God. I invite you to come not as one ready to build a dwelling place, but as one ready to be amazed at the power and majesty of the Almighty. I invite you to come as one who is ready to encounter the touch of God in your life. For, as you will see, there is no place, no time, no situation, no failure, no distance to far off the path of righteousness that puts one out of the reach of the touch of God. "God's glory and magnificence and power and majesty are unsurpassable, we say; but we must also declare that God's glory and magnificence and power and majesty are surpassed by God's willingness to shed them all in order that we might finally recognized God's love and gentleness."<sup>vii</sup>

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and it calls us to do nothing more and nothing less than lay at the ground before the Almighty, to listen to the voice of the Messiah, and to receive the great empowerment that comes from the touch of the Creator.

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<sup>i</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> David Lose. Davidlose.net. Retrieved February 22, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Bryant. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>iv</sup> Ann Case-Winters. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Matthew*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2015.

<sup>v</sup> Patrick Wilson. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.