

Sermon for February 11, 2018: “The Trouble with Transcendence”

Transfiguration Sunday, Year B – Texts: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

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Back in 1999, Jane, Jane’s mom, and I went to England and Scotland. We saw some incredible things. We saw Stonehenge, the Tower of London. We saw Edinburgh Castle, the “Old Course” at St. Andrew’s. We got to walk on the nearby beach where they filmed the famous scene from “Chariots of Fire” with all the men running. We visited a number of pubs where the food is surprisingly good and a “pint” is 20 ounces! But more than anything else we saw lots of churches! Now, if you’ve ever been to any of the great cathedrals of Europe you soon find that very few of our churches compare to the grandness of a great gothic cathedral. We saw the cathedral in Durham, the one in York, the one in Salisbury (where a copy of the Magna Carta is kept). We saw St. Paul’s in London and, of course, we saw Westminster Abbey. Magnificent – all of them! And no matter where you went when you walk inside everything draws your eyes up. The arches, the very high ceilings and domes, the stained-glass windows, the organs. Just incredible. There are numerous tours available in different languages and even though there were tons of tourists milling about the church felt very empty when you stood inside the vast space. The cathedral’s size and design, the towering spires and gothic arches are meant to convey one simple message that God is big, **very** big! And, that you are small, **very** small. The fancy word for this is **transcendence**. God’s transcendence was the message of the cathedral. God filled the world from the ground to the sky and from nearly any direction the cathedral’s towers could be seen. God seemed to fill every nook and cranny of these amazing places. It seemed to be that it was human beings who intruded humbly into a world that is God’s, and not the other way around.

Today in our gospel reading, Jesus and the disciples go up the un-named mountain of transfiguration and while there – something happens to Jesus. Mark, as we heard, tells us that **“He was transfigured before them, and His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.”** Matthew’s version recounts that He **“was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became dazzling white.”** Luke tells us **“that the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became dazzling white.”** If that wasn’t enough, those two main pillars of the Hebrew faith show up, Moses and Elijah, just to make it clear that this is a really big deal. So yeah, if there’s a word to describe what’s happening here it would be transcendence. God is filling their world from ground to sky in every direction and in every nook and cranny. Yet, the transcendence can often be a disquieting experience, uncomfortable feeling to say the least, and who can blame the disciples for feeling that way? Wouldn’t we be equally confused to see a transfigured Jesus on a mountain top with Moses and Elijah? Yet, Peter thinks he has figured things out. He suggested building some sort of a dwelling place, somewhere he can put this transcendent Jesus and His buddies Moses and Elijah, where they can be contained. And who knows, maybe we can get people to come and see, maybe charge admission or take up a collection. Peter has the same instinct with God that we so often do. Peter wants to change the **transcendent** experience of the divine into an **imminent** one. Now, what do I mean by imminent with respect to God? Well, the opposite of transcendent. So, if transcendent is about the bigness, the over-and-above-ness of God. Imminence is the closeness and familiar-ness of God. The comfortable, the intimate. Human beings tend to prefer this.

For one thing, imminence is manageable. It's apparent that Peter understood this which seems to be, he says what he says. Bless his heart, he senses the presence of God but the rest, he just doesn't seem to get. Aren't we like that sometimes too? Sometimes we get uncomfortable with the bigness of God, with a God who fills the ground to the sky, a God who is in every nook and cranny in creation. Sometimes we prefer a cozy and comfortable God; one who makes us feel nice and warm, one who's manageable. This imminent God doesn't challenge us, and certainly asks nothing of us. The cozy faith that centers round feeling the warmth of family and friends as they gather. The kind of faith that's all about really great coffee in the lobby, passive, entertaining worship, innocuous sermons promising a wealth of blessings that are there for the asking. It's the kind of faith and worship we can unconsciously strive for. In fact, Christians in North America often think that the solution to our decline is to make God even more imminent, even more cozy and comfortable, more entertaining and non-threatening. The largest church in America, Joel Osteen's Lakewood church in Houston, got rid of the cross altogether. Yet, our world seems to be longing for a God who's bigger than the troubles of the world, not a warm blanket that makes us feel nice. Our world longs for a God that is bigger than war and violence, bigger than poverty and injustice, bigger than discrimination, racism and inequality. Our world needs a God who transcends those things in the world which we no power against. A God who greater than evil, bigger than suffering, stronger than death. And so, with Peter's words still hanging in the awkward silence, God speaks. As if the Transfiguration couldn't get more transcendent, God breaks open the heavens and fills the world with God's voice and speaks directly to the disciples. God repeats the message from the moment of Jesus' baptism, "This is My son, the Beloved, with Him I am well pleased." But this time God adds, "Listen to Him." Hearing this the disciples finally understand what's happening and they fall to their faces in fear. The transcendence of this mountaintop has finally hit them. They've been struck by the powerful message that God is big, very big; and they are small, very small...not in terms of significance, but relationally. God's bigness, God's transcendence, fills our world. God cannot be kept in any sort of dwelling or container. God cannot be restricted to a mountain top, no matter how big the mountain! God is filling the world; God is filling the disciples' world and God is filling our world. And God the Father has sent Jesus the Son to do the filling so, it might behoove the disciples to pay attention to their friend and teacher.

Suddenly, it's over. Everything is back to normal. Jesus isn't in dazzling white anymore and Moses and Elijah are gone. The same four who hiked up the mountain now come back down. There's work to do and Jerusalem and the cross lie ahead. Jesus will do what Peter cannot, what we cannot. He is Emmanuel. The imminent God with us. He is teacher, brother, friend. He takes that imminence, the closeness, the intimacy, comfortable and manageable. Jesus takes all that and connects us to the transcendence of God. He bridges the two, not either-or but both-and! You see, even though the bright light, white clouds and the pillars of faith are gone, even though the voice of God is no longer speaking from heaven, the transcendence is still there!

Jesus and disciples go back down the mountain, back to the ministry they are called to do. But, the bridge to heaven remains. And it remains through Jesus Himself. Jesus is bringing heaven down to God's people making the transcendent imminent. Through Jesus, the kingdom of heaven which we imagine is to be so far from us, so far from our understanding has been brought near to us has been established within us!

Something similar would happen at the top of the very next mountain Jesus would climb, Golgotha. There Jesus will be transformed once more. There the heavens will open. There the powers of death are defeated. True, it will look different but it will be no less glorious. There the bridge to heaven will be again on display for those with eyes to see and with minds to imagine the bigness of God. The same will be true in a few moments as we gather around Christ's table. The elements are a reminder of both the transcendence and imminence of God. These simple things, some bread, some juice. Ordinary things, familiar things, made extraordinary in remembering Him and what He accomplished for us. It's not what we're able to do but what He has already done! It's not the mountain top however high and lofty its peak. It's not the cathedral, the work of the architect, the skill of the builders. None of that, beautiful though they invariably are, are the conduits to the transcendent in our world. Rather, it is the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the beloved of God who is our connection to the divine who brings that bigness into the smallest places of our lives. We would do very well indeed to listen to Him!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.