

Sunday February 26th, 2017
Transfiguration

PRAYER: We have wandered in the wilderness and, finally, we have found our way. By night your pillar of fire has led us; by day your tower of clouds has guided us. We have wandered and weaved our way to this mountain, and now we clear a place to meet with you. Overshadow us, we pray; let your voice break through the hovering cloud to fall upon our ears. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: We seek you on the mountaintop, O God, for we fear to face the city. We would rather be dazzled by your splendor on some high and lofty place than obey your commands in the urban wilderness. We find it easier to worship the wonder-working Jesus than to follow the Christ, who was obedient unto death. Merciful God, forgive our shallow ways. Help us to find you whenever you choose to dwell, and to serve you wherever you choose to send us. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: “Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession...Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

STEWARDSHIP: As the transfigured Christ revealed a life offered for the sake of us all, let us present our gifts for the sake of others. May God transform this money into the hope of justice, our time into signs of service, our talents into acts of ministry and ourselves into expressions of faithfulness.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, you have called us up from the valleys to your mountain. As we stand in your presence on a mountain made not by human hands but by your creative Word, we are overcome by awe. This place of reverence and revelation has not stood against floods for just a day, or a year, but since time lost to human memory. Like Moses, and Jesus and many others, we recognize this mountain as your dwelling place, your throne, your footstool. With such a marvelous place to dwell we are humbled that you chose not to remain there but to come and dwell among us, while at the same time calling us to rush up to meet you. Thank you, gracious Father, for filing our valleys and making them smooth as plains.

You called your only Son Jesus to carry on this work. You sent him to save us from the pitfalls we did not see and to deliver us from those we carved for ourselves. Now, as your sons and daughters, we are called to do the same. But we are afraid. Though your hand of mercy touches us, we are afraid to embrace our own lives, much less the lives of strangers. We are reluctant to change life where it is familiar and comfortable, even when we know we should and how we could.

We pray for ourselves and for others of your frightened children. Lift up our eyes. Help us to see where we can begin to make changes. If someone requires our time, help us to give it. If someone asks for our patience, help us to grant it. If someone cries out for understanding, help us to find it. If someone argues for a different way, help us to examine it. If someone needs a generous hand, help us to offer it. If someone wants to bless our lives, help us to receive it. If someone struggles beneath a burden, help us to carry it. If someone suffers from a wrong we have done, help us to mend it. O Lord, hear our prayer. Your way is so easy when we are standing on the mountaintop.

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There, at a distance from the rest of the world, we feel forgive, loved, reassured. We are so tempted to remain with you on this special place. But you send us with your blessing and your mission back to those places from which we came. Be our vision, O God! Help us to see!

BENEDICTION: Lord, we have seen, but we are not convinced of the truth of our vision. Make it sure, and make us prophets of your presence, whether you stand on the pinnacle or the plain, in splendor or simplicity. Amen.

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Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-20
“What Goes Up, Must Come Down”

In our shared modern experience, we have become quite sensitive to being politically correct. Politicians, managers, ministers, teacher and anyone else in a position of authority are strongly encouraged to use extreme caution when talking about issues of race, creed or colour. Nor are we permitted, as we saw recently when a police officer was addressing university students on personal safety, to describe someone dressing provocatively with crude words, and saying they were at fault for getting assaulted.

No one wants to be seen as: insensitive, disrespectful or propagating stereotypes. However, sometimes, you cannot help but laugh at what are clearly stereotypes, but they are stereotypes that hold some truth. One of my favourite comedians is Jeff Foxworthy, and his friends, who make up the *Blue Colour Comedy Tour*. Foxworthy's major shtick is to poke fun at “Red-necks”. Foxworthy admits that, so called Red-necks, are thought to come primarily from the southern US, but that's not really true.

Foxworthy states that he defines being a “Redneck” as having a “glorious lack of sophistication”. So, in celebration of Rednecks everywhere, and at the risk of not being politically correct, I present to you things you will never, ever, hear a Redneck say.

*We don't keep firearms in this house. I thought Graceland was tacky.
Has anybody seen the sideburn trimmer? Wrestling's fake.
You can't feed that to the dog. We're vegetarians. What's NASCAR?
I just couldn't find a thing in Wal-Mart today. Elvis who? Checkmate.
Does the salad bar have bean sprouts? Deer heads detract from the décor.*

Foxworthy would add in his famous southern drawl, “You know you're a Redneck when... You've ever had a Christmas dinner on a Ping-Pong table. You know you're a Redneck when, you have more dogs on your front porch than people. You know you are a Redneck when your home has wheels. You know you are a Redneck when your wife says, “Honey can you get that transmission out of the bathtub, I want to have a shower.”

We laugh at such observations, because we know underneath them is a kernel of truth. The danger lies, in trying to apply a personality or cultural trait to everyone based on our ill-informed assumptions. Laura and I had an opportunity to see the remake of the movie *The Karate Kid* with Jaden Smith and Jackie Chan. The premise of the film is about a young boy being taken from Detroit, by his widowed mother, to live in China.

On the airplane heading to Beijing, the fidgety young boy is told by his mother to try out his Mandarin Chinese on the man across the aisle on the plane. With considerable coaxing, he musters his courage and tries saying hello in Chinese. The man, across the aisle of the plane, who looks Chinese, replies in perfect English, “Dude! I'm from Detroit.” The slightly embarrassed boy pauses, and being also from Detroit says, “Then, what's up!” Despite efforts to be sensitive and politically correct, we still make assumptions about people all the time, based on what we see or hear.

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This is particularly true, in a multi-cultural city like Toronto. For example: when you see a woman wearing a full length, face covering burka, what do you assume? I bet, most of the time, you assume that here is a woman subjugated to her husband, and that she has little freedom and few options in life. Whether that particular assumption, is true or not, is not my concern today, but rather I am concerned about ill-informed and erroneous assumptions we make about other people.

Specifically, I am very concerned, about the assumptions we make about Jesus. From the very moment he was born, people began making assumptions about who Jesus was, and what he was up to. Remember King Herod; he made an assumption that Jesus came to threaten his rule, and he killed several babies in the Bethlehem area because of that assumption.

The Pharisees, and Sadducees, made assumptions, that Jesus was a false prophet, and even accused him several times of blasphemy. The Roman Governor, Pilate, made some assumptions about Jesus; namely that he was harmless, and just a minor irritant in his control over Judea; but ultimately he chose to crucify him anyway. For two thousand years, men and woman, all over this world, have made assumptions about Jesus; and ultimately these assumptions have had a major impact on their lives.

The Gospel lesson for today is, all about confronting assumptions about Jesus; especially assumptions held by his disciples. What, we shall hopefully discover, is that these same assumptions still persist today, and still need to be addressed. We call this passage, *The Transfiguration*, meaning Jesus was changed in appearance or he was transfigured. That title, however, is somewhat misleading, because Jesus never changed in this passage. It was the disciples who were transfigured, or more accurately their vision was changed.

What the disciples saw, was Jesus' true nature. A nature: always present, always on display, if they only had faith to see it. The veil, of their human assumptions, was briefly lifted so they could see Jesus as he truly is. In this transfigured state, which I still argue is likely his permanent state; Jesus is shown to be dwelling in the very glory of God. Jesus' relationship to the Father is, so intimate, that God's glory shines in its fullness around and through him.

This event, on the mountain, comes at a critical moment in Jesus' attempt to teach his disciples about who he truly is. Six days before this transfiguration occurred, two significant things happened. The first event, is that the Holy Spirit reveals to Peter the full identity of Jesus. Jesus asked, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" "Well", they replied, "Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." (Matt. 16:13-14)

Then he asked them, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus states, "You did not learn this from any human being." In other words, the Holy Spirit revealed the truth to Peter. The second thing that happened was that Jesus predicted his death, and made it very clear the high cost of being his followers. Jesus said, "Shoulder your cross. If you try to keep your life, you will lose it."

Good stuff! Important Stuff! However, a question remains in the minds and hearts of the disciples.

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“If, I am going to give up my life to follow Jesus, I need to be sure; sure he is who he says he is.” It’s the same question people have been asking for two thousand years. Who is Jesus? Is he the Messiah, as Peter declared? Is he simply another prophet, like Elijah or Moses? Is he a Hebrew philosopher, offering insight and teaching about the scriptures, and ideas for leading a righteous life? Who are you Jesus, really?

So, here we have the disciples wrestling with the same question we have. How, we answer this question; will determine much of our life’s course. So, six days after challenging his disciples to pick up their cross, he takes his inner circle of disciples: James, John and of course Peter, up a high mountain. We don’t know if Jesus told them why they were doing this, but up they went; clearly reminiscent of the times Moses went up a mountain to meet God.

Once on the mountain, two important things contrast each other to drive the truth home to the disciples. The first contrast occurs, when the disciples see Jesus in his true state. Before their eyes he appeared in dazzlingly white clothes. His face was shining. His face was as bright as the sun. Jesus was also not alone, for two of the greatest Hebrew prophets; Elijah and Moses are standing with him and talking to him.

We can appreciate the impact of such a sight on the disciples. Overwhelmed by this display, Peter blurts out, “Lord this is wonderful! If you want me to, I’ll make three shrines, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” The word *shrine* means booth or better yet, the word shelter. The contrast, I spoke of, occurs in opposition to Peter’s words. A bright cloud came over them, and from the cloud a voice spoke. “This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him. Listen to him.”

This contrast, between what Peter says and what God says, is crucial for the disciples. When Peter offers to make three shrines, he reveals that he sees Jesus from only a human perspective. Peter thinks of Jesus as on the same level as Moses and Elijah; just another special prophet. What Peter fails to see, is the unique relationship Jesus has with the Father. Jesus’ appearance is a representation of that unique, intimate relationship.

God declares this uniqueness, by speaking from the cloud. As at his baptism, God declares Jesus to be his Son, and that he is well pleased with him. Jesus is not like Moses and Elijah. He is greater than they are. When God says, “Listen to him”, he pronounces that Jesus has God’s full authority. Jesus is not just a prophet; he is the Son of God. This transfiguration story reveals that Jesus is our mediator with heaven

Furthermore, this experience on the mountain, tells us that we cannot participate in this special relationship with God, and Jesus, if we continue to see Jesus from only a human perspective. The voice from heaven will remain silent, unless we acknowledge Jesus as God’s Son. If we want to see the full glory of Christ, and participate in that glory, we must acknowledge his true nature.

The second contrast that occurs in the passage has to do with the reaction of the disciples. Specifically, the reaction of the disciples to the voice they hear from the cloud, which of course is God’s voice. Their immediate reaction is to fall on their faces, in terror.

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The question must be asked, why they are afraid. I know what you are thinking, “Well, gee Darrell that was God speaking, who wouldn’t be afraid. I’d be downright terrified.” If you feel that way, I understand, and God understands, but something is still wrong.

Let’s be honest. Their terror comes from a lack of faith. Specifically, it reveals that they are not participating in the same relationship with God that Jesus enjoys. Their terror reveals that they thought of themselves as intruders, or outsiders. They feared, being punished, for stepping on holy ground. A great number of people harbour this same fear. They fear an encounter with God. So, they fearfully avoid anything that may provide that encounter. They avoid churches, prayer, scripture, and anything that hints at faith.

Even well-meaning Christian folk go through life, fearful of stepping into a holy place. If Peter, James and John had known what was going to happen on that mountain, would they have gone? Would we? Years ago, when I took my clinical training, I learned a little tidbit about how you can tell how close someone is to God. All you have to do is listen to how they speak about God.

Do they call him Father, as Jesus told us? Or do they use names that reveal a deliberate distancing from God. Names like, “The big man upstairs, you know who, the Big Boss, and many others.” In Judaism, so fearful of intimacy with God were the people that they refused to call God by the only name he ever gave to us, “I am” or in Hebrew, *Yahweh*. Even when they wrote the word *Yahweh* they leave out letters, lest they be too familiar.

The contrast with the disciples’ fear comes in a surprising way. It seems like a simple thing that Jesus does, but it is really quite eye-opening. The bible says, “Jesus came over and touched them. He said, “Get up, and don’t be afraid.” It would be easy to miss the significance of what Jesus did, but did you catch the fact that he touched them. Think back to other times Jesus touched someone. Why did he do it?

Most often, the gospel writers tell us, that Jesus touched people when he healed them. The implication was that when he touched them, God’s holy power moved through Jesus, into the person seeking healing. In each instance, there was restoration of wholeness, at least in terms of their physical condition, and often their spiritual condition. This time, the disciples are the ones touched, and healed of their lack of faith.

Just like the paralytic people, healed by Jesus, who rose to their feet; the disciples healed of their lack of faith, rise to their feet. I guess, I never really saw unbelief as a sickness, but it really is. Lack of faith, is a malady of the human condition. We can be just as crippled by lack of faith as by: any cancer, handicap or damage from an accident. Jesus’ healing, of the disciples, reveals the danger of our lives being lived in a dysfunctional manner.

We are, by the implication of this passage, all sick. We are all in need of his healing touch, so we can rise up to our feet as people of faith. The conclusion I come to from this passage is that: if we have fear in approaching our heavenly Father, or in participating in that intimate relationship Christ enjoys with God, then we are ill. Fear is the symptom of our ill health.

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Lack of faith is the disease. We need to know this more than we think. When we are on the mountain top, having our deeply, intimate, spiritual encounters with God in Christ, we must remember that eventually we must return or go back down the mountain. Up on the mountain, there is wonder and amazement, but down in the valley, is the messiness of life. In the account of the gospel, the messiness the disciples encounter is a demon possessed boy at the hill bottom.

In our lives, in the valley, could be all kinds of different types of turmoil. It could be: physical illness, relational stress, employment issue, all kinds of things. The valley will also include encounters with other people, who like the demon possessed boy, are facing immense tragedy. If we want to have any positive impact on this messiness of life, then we need to be people of faith.

While: Jesus, Peter, James and John were on the mountain; the father of the demon possessed boy went to the remaining disciples for help. They couldn't do anything to relieve the boy's suffering. After Jesus releases the boy from his torment, the disciples want to know why they couldn't heal him. Jesus reply is very telling.

"You didn't have enough faith. I assure you, even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it would move. Nothing would be impossible." (Matthew 17:20-21)

If we are finding too many impossible things in life, we are in need of Jesus' healing touch. If we are feeling a deep fear of God and any intimate contact with him, then we need Christ's healing touch. If life has knocked you down, and you struggle to get back up, then you need the touch of Christ. The fear, the anxiety, the hopelessness, and the powerlessness you are feeling, are symptomatic of a greater illness; faithlessness.

The Great Physician wants to heal us, if we just have the faith to ask.