



SERMONS THAT WORK

Last Sunday After the Epiphany

[RCL] Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Psalm 2; Matthew 17:1-9

How the Story Ends

How many of you enjoy a good mystery story? If your favorite character is walking into doom, do you get nervous? Are you the kind of person who will skip to the last chapter and make sure everything's okay before you go on? If so, do you bother to read the rest of the book after that?

Sometimes, we can infer how the ending will unfold, depending on how far we are into the book. We still read the rest, because there are character developments and nuances that we might miss otherwise, which will make the ending even more meaningful and fully understood. The work of living out the story with the characters must be done, not despite but *because* we had that brief flash of knowing the ending from the middle of the story.

Now what if you were reading and learned that one of the characters dies a horrible death, only to flip ahead and read the final pages—really quickly, of course—and find them on the page again, alive and well? Was their death a trick? A dream? The intrigue might motivate you to read more.

Imagine this: you are with the disciples—Peter, James, and John—as they walk up the mountain with Jesus. Now, in Jewish tradition, when a person goes up a mountain, there is almost a guarantee that they will have some sort of divine encounter. Suddenly, Jesus is transfigured before you, in dazzling white clothes—a symbol of a heavenly figure from God. Could this possibly be a sneak peak of the end of the story, given to us during the middle? Is Jesus showing himself as he will be *after* the resurrection? Possibly. But the disciples aren't thinking about that at all. They do not know what is to come and are completely thrown into terror.

The author Madeleine L'Engle wrote the famous books *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, and *A Circle of Quiet*, among others. What you may not know is that, for more than 30 years, Madeleine was the librarian for and had an office at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. She also wrote and traveled occasionally while raising three children with her husband, Hugh Franklin. On one of her journeys, she visited Egypt and asked the guide why there were so many vultures, crocodiles, and cobras in their temples. The guide told her it was because the Egyptians worshiped what they feared.

What an interesting statement: “They worshiped what they feared.” Fear and confusion are precursors to transformation, but they do not always lead to transformation. If we get stuck in our fear, we cannot be

transformed, and if we worship what we fear, then we most certainly will stay stuck. Fear can drive people back to the certainty of what we used to know, rather than toward something new. With fear, the world becomes very small—as small as a clearing on a mountain top. Transformation cannot happen when the brain is living in flight, fight, freeze, or fawn mode. Then, the focus becomes on surviving, not thriving; being cautious of, not being in true relationship with. In fear, the brain shuts down to new possibilities, especially the possibility of being transfigured—being made more whole.

Our Bible has quite the collection of stories: stories that can make one person believe in the wonder of the universe and our part in it; stories can make another person run the other way, in fear. The stories we've heard today from Exodus and the Gospel are two stories that we often don't know what to do with because they are so wild, so wonderful. To enforce the language of literalism on them, or to fear them, tames and restricts the message that God has for us in them. These stories, these myths, witness to what gives meaning to our lives. As Madeleine L'Engle once said, "The brilliance of God is indeed blinding, and we need myth, story, to help us bear the light."

When Elijah and Moses appear during the moment of Jesus' Transfiguration—the two big figures from Jewish tradition, who also suffered in service to God—the disciples don't know what to do. Both Elijah and Moses were seen as figures who conquered death in Jewish culture. They believed that Elijah would come back at the end of time, and since no one knew where Moses was buried, legend grew that he, too, would come back. Yet here they were, standing, talking with Jesus. What does it mean that Jesus is talking with them? Does it mean that Jesus will have a similar fate? Peter makes the suggestion of building three dwellings so that they can all stay there, capturing this holy moment. As Peter says, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here..."

Is it? Is it good for us to be here? To remain here, on the mountain, while the world passes by below? How often do we want to hold on to a "mountaintop experience" or a "God moment"? We hold tight to moments of pure and utter bliss—moments of extreme holiness. Is it "good for us to be here," and to keep this holy moment to ourselves?

When we fixate on a particular time or a particular thing, we can miss our purpose. We become like the creature Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* series, who wanted to keep the one ring to himself—his "Precious." We want to keep our "precious" experiences in our possession; yet by doing so, we exclude everything else. We can become stunted and twisted, like Gollum. What was "good" for a moment becomes stale and eventually poisons us, when it isn't allowed to be shared—like fruit rotting on the vine. This goes for many facets of life: in our church, at work, and in our relationships. It is good for us to be here right now, yes, but it is even better to come away, back down the mountain, with fresh knowledge and joy to share with others.

For the disciples and Jesus to stay on the mountain would have been detrimental to the rest of the Gospel story. The disciples don't want to believe that Jesus will suffer and die, yet that is what must happen in order for Jesus to receive the glory of the resurrection. As he previously told the disciples, the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be killed, but will be raised again after three days. When the cloud covers the mountain and God says to them, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" it makes the subsequent failings of the disciples (and our own) even more poignant. James and John arguing about who will sit at Jesus' right hand, all of them falling asleep when Jesus needed them to stay with him at Gethsemane,

Peter's denial. They do not seem to understand that the price of receiving the mantle of Jesus is suffering. Do we?

For Jesus, there is no glory without suffering, and there cannot be resurrection without death. There is no miracle of life without the miracle of death.

How must we experience death—death to ourselves; to our sin—in order to experience life?

We have all had spiritual highs—at retreats, church camp, baptisms, weddings, during special prayer time—and our compulsion can be to want to keep things as they are. It is a very human thing to do. But we worship a God who is always doing a new thing, and the name of the game is change. Jesus' call to us is one of action. Don't stay on the mountain. Don't build dwellings. Instead, go back down the mountain, back into civilization, and back to the broken world in need of healing.

We are to take our transfiguration moments—our God moments—with us, to remind us why we are on this journey, especially when things are difficult. Like Peter, James, and John, we may not always understand what we have witnessed, but we know that we are loved and called by the God who shares them with us.

As we prepare to enter the spiritual wilderness of Lent, we already know how this book ends. The story of Jesus requires us to take the brilliance of the Transfiguration into our own journeys, so that God can give the ending meaning.

May we be given the courage to be transformed, so that we can bear the light and mystery of God to others, setting the whole world aglow as 2 Peter declares: “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises” in our hearts. Amen.

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