

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler, Bishop of Wyoming
World Mission Sunday / Last Sunday after Epiphany (Year A)
February 19, 2023
Matthew 17:1-9

The Greatest Exodus

On this Last Sunday after Epiphany, and what is known in our Church as World Mission Sunday, I am standing in one of our churches on the Wind River Reservation here in Wyoming known as Our Father's House. It is a historic log church, containing beautiful artwork from the Northern Arapaho tribe. And the window behind the altar looks out on the breathtakingly majestic Wind River Mountains, which are sacred to our Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone sisters and brothers – who see these mountains as a place that one goes to experience, even enter into, a spiritual dimension. It seems fitting to contemplate today's Gospel reading, most often referred to as The Transfiguration on the Mountain, while surrounded by these sacred mountains, which have been places of transformation since ancient times for Native peoples.

The transfiguration story is clothed in great mystery. It certainly doesn't fit easily into our rational categories. Many artists over the centuries have attempted to portray this mystical experience. I have found the depiction of an icon by the renowned artist-priest Fr. John Giuliani (who died in 2021) particularly powerful in communicating the complete "otherness" of this story. In his signature style, Fr. Giuliani paints all three figures as Lakota up on the mountain – with Moses, wrapped in buffalo hide, wearing a Chief's feathered headdress and carrying an eagle's wing as a sign of authority. And Elijah the prophet carrying a peace pipe. And Jesus, transfigured, wearing a wool Pendleton blanket and encircled by sacred heavenly light.

Deep within these strange happenings are some profound spiritual truths for us as we think about God's work in our world. This story would have immediately reminded the Jewish people at that time of their own popular story in the Hebrew Bible of Moses' powerful encounter with God on that awe-inspiring Mount Sinai – which is today's first reading. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a "high mountain." We are not told which mountain, but Christian tradition over the centuries has understood it to be Mount Tabor in the lower Galilee region.

A few months ago I had the privilege of leading a group of pilgrims from Wyoming to the Holy Land, and we began the pilgrimage up on the summit of Mount Tabor, where there is a beautiful church today built by the Franciscans, which is itself built upon a 4th century Byzantine church. Mount Tabor provides a magnificent



view of the Galilee. And high above the altar of the church is a stunning mosaic, on a gold background, of the Transfiguration story.

Just like to so many of our Native sisters and brothers, mountains had great symbolic significance throughout the ancient Middle East - in the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian cultures. They represented places where *transformation* took place. Hence, mountain tops were often locations for temples, altars, shrines, churches and mosques today. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, mountains are frequent sites of God's revelation. And of course it was on Mt. Sinai, that God was most fully revealed to Moses.

We lived in Egypt for ten years serving with The Episcopal Church. And climbing Mt. Sinai is quite an unforgettable experience. What strikes you perhaps more than anything else is how Mt. Sinai is a spiritual site for so many people. Today pilgrims from all over the world of all faith traditions, especially Christians, Muslims and Jews, come to the 6th century St. Catherine's Monastery, which stands at the base of Mt. Sinai, to pray for healing or some type of miracle. Then they journey up the mountain; first on camel, then the rest of the way by foot. Upon reaching the peak, the first thing one sees is a little chapel and a small mosque. It is indeed a holy site. And one can't help but feel a sense of glimpsing into another and deeper spiritual dimension as you look out across the vast barren and jagged red mountainous Sinai desert, as far as the eye can see.

We are told that on the mountain Jesus was "transfigured," not "he transfigured"- but "*he was* transfigured!" The understanding is that this was accomplished by God. The word "transfigured" comes from the Greek, related to the word "metamorphosis" - meaning a "radical transformation."

Another way to look at this is as a "total restoration" to the way things are supposed to be. In other words, a world that is transfigured. It was a brief picture of how God envisions how everything can be, where all in the world is transformed and put right. When one looks at the pain, the loss, the hardship, the suffering in the world, both collectively and individually, we know that something is terribly wrong. Just to see the ongoing suffering of the Ukrainians, let alone what we go through ourselves, we know it was not meant to be this way.

This Gospel story gives us a glimpse of when all is made new - restored to the way our Creator originally intended it to be. It is like the curtain was pulled back for a moment. Despite all the differences between the various spiritual traditions, for the most part they agree that so much of the way this world is, is not as it was created to be. Or in other language, we were made in the image of our Creator, but something went off-kilter. Deep down we know we were made for something more, something different.

One of the reasons so many artists have been drawn to portray this mystical incident, is that it is full of visual imagery – symbolism as to what the desire and intention of God is for us, for everyone, and for our world.

The *cloud* reminds us of God's direct presence with us. It was in a cloud that Moses met God on Mt. Sinai - and we remember that a "pillar of cloud" followed the Hebrew people in the Sinai wilderness, assuring

them of God's presence. The story illustrates for us visually that there is nothing like being fully in the presence of our Creator. And then there is the *dazzling whiteness* of Jesus' clothing. There is a sense we are reminded of God's desire to make all things beautiful and whole. That God can set all things right again, restoring them even beyond their original beauty. And there is also the *mystical presence of Moses and Elijah*. In Jewish thought Moses represented the Law of God, and Elijah represented the greatest of the prophets who communicated God's desire to them. In essence, together they represented to the Jewish people a summation their own spiritual journey with God. This whole experience on the mountain reminds us that in each of our own spiritual journeys, our spiritual hunger can be fully met. Some of us wake up in the middle of the night, yearning to experience greater intimacy with our Creator; desiring a fresh touch from God, longing to hear our Maker's voice more clearly.

Furthermore, and most importantly, the *voice of God* in this mystical experience spoke words that demonstrate to everyone how our beautiful Creator really sees each of us. God says to them on the mountain, "This is my Son whom I love." *This is MY child, whom I love*. It reminds us of how God sees us as God's creation. It is a glimpse of being swept up in and by the love of God, of being fully and completely accepted by God - so much so that Jesus' whole being here ends up transformed. It is a mystical display of how beautifully God sees us, and what God longs for us all to experience.

And the three disciples with Jesus - Peter, James and John - found this the most profound experience imaginable. Peter was so captivated by the beauty of it all that he wanted to stay in that dimension from then on. His immediate response was to say, in the First Nations Version of Matthew's Gospel: *"Wisdomkeeper, this is a good place to stay...I will put up three tipis - one of you, one for 'Drawn from the Water' (Moses), and one for 'Great Spirit is Creator' (Elijah)." He wanted to make this sacred moment last as long as possible; to live permanently in this state of being, rather than return to the challenge and difficulties of everyday life.*

However, there is a great paradox presented to us in the story. We are told that "when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone." And then it says, "As they were coming down the mountain. . . ." However much they wished for that extraordinary spiritual experience to continue, where all is restored and made whole, Jesus led them back downhill. For it is in the everyday, on the plains, deserts and in the valleys, where one enters most fully and deeply into God's call for each of us.

All of this begs the deeper question, "What did Peter, James and John really experience that could so completely transform their and our existence?" Thankfully, the Gospel writer Luke, in his account of this mystical episode, tells us that Jesus had been speaking to them about "his exodus." The word "exodus" of course is a word all early listeners to this story would have immediately understood. Both the use of the word "exodus" and Moses' mystical appearance in all this, would have reminded them of their own ancient story of being led out of captivity in Egypt, across the Red Sea, and eventually into the Promised Land. It is what they referred to as the "Exodus." Even the bright cloud that overshadowed them on the mountain is a reminder of the "pillar of cloud" in the Exodus story which led the Hebrew people out of the Sinai desert, representing the unique deliverance of God. So, the predominant theme here is of Exodus, or as we would say today, of *freedom*.

And this is precisely what Jesus' life and teachings were all about; setting people free in the deepest of ways, toward becoming new. Jesus was all about pointing to the "Great Exodus" - out of the dark or damaging grip that often exists in our lives and our world, toward God's original beautiful desire for us. The heart of Jesus' message was, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed," and "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

The older I get, and the more I experience life, the more I realize that life with our Creator relates to every part of us - spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and physically. How often do we dream of what it would be like to truly be completely free - being able to escape or cast off whatever burden, darkness, challenge, fear or worry that is often be part of our lives. Thank God, every once in a while, many of us have had glimpses of that freedom; we have tasted what it means to be able to leap out of everything that holds us back or weighs us down.

Our Gospel reading today reminds us that the journey of faith with Christ is a road to greater and greater freedom, as God loves us too much to leave us the way we are. There is no deeper transfiguration, and no greater transformational message for us. And not just for us, but for everyone we encounter. As that marvelous 20th century English writer, C.S. Lewis, said: "If we let [God], [God] will make the feeblest...of us into dazzling, radiant immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine..."

At the end of the day, that word "mission" quite simply means transformation. That regardless of anything in life, we and all the world are guaranteed of God's presence and transformational freedom - of being able to be transfigured into what God so beautifully intends for us. I believe this is why the Transfiguration story is immediately followed in all three synoptic Gospels by a story of a young boy who is desperately ill who is made completely well by Jesus.

In closing, I am reminded of another Middle Eastern boy who experienced Christ's transformation - albeit in a different way. Outside the city of Cairo, Egypt, where we lived, on the edge of a high limestone mountain, is a large slum where many thousands of Coptic Christian garbage collectors live. It is an indescribably filthy area, with pigs walking all around, the smell almost unbearable in the desert heat. Years ago, a young Egyptian businessman, Samaan Ibrahim, while studying the life of Christ, felt led to move into this forsaken place to serve its people. Today, he is a Coptic Orthodox priest, with over 40 years of ministry there, and the garbage collectors, and their families, worship in massive caves carved out of the limestone hill. Astonishingly, every Thursday evening up to 13,000 people gather to worship in an amphitheater carved into the rock.

One of those worshippers was a young garbage collector's son named Yusuf. A number of years ago at a Cairo building site nearby, an American executive of a large construction company lost his gold Rolex watch. Not long after, the young boy, Yusuf, who was at that time an apprentice to his father, learning how to best collect garbage, found that gold watch. That watch was worth more money than Yusuf would earn during his lifetime. Yet, due to having become a follower of Christ through that remarkable ministry in their slum area, his first inclination was to find the watch's owner in order to return it. This was obviously a

difficult decision and one very different than he would have previously made before following the way of Christ.

It took several months of looking and asking questions for Yusuf to discover the true owner of the Rolex watch. He learned that the owner was staying in a luxury apartment building in Cairo. As a poor garbage collector, wearing a dirty robe, known as a *galabeya*, he would never have been let into this beautiful apartment building through the lobby; he would have looked completely out of place. So, Yusuf figured out a way to get in through a back exit-door used for garbage removal and climbed the stairs to the floor where the American was staying and knocked on his door. The American answered the door, somewhat astonished to see someone in the hallway dressed as shabbily as Yusuf.

"You lost something?" Yusuf nervously blurted out in his minimal English. It had been a few months, so the loss of the watch never came to the owner's mind. "This watch?" Yusuf asked as he took the watch out of the pocket of his robe. Upon seeing his watch, the stunned American invited Yusuf in. And he asked him, "Tell me why you didn't sell it?" Yusuf replied, "Jesus taught us to not steal. It's not mine. I must be honest." The American asked him, "Are you a Christian?" having initially assumed that he was Muslim, as most Egyptians are. "Yes," Yusuf replied.

Quite remarkably, that American, who previously described himself as an agnostic, after having grown up in a Christian home, renewed his faith, becoming a follower of Christ, due to the example of young Yusuf who had quite simply been transformed by the teachings of Jesus. And he wrote in his diary, "I came back to Christ because of a poor Egyptian garbage collector in Cairo who really followed Jesus." And that man is one of those who helped to provide the funding needed for that massive cave church to be built into the hillside. It came full circle.

That is what "mission" is all about. This mystical story of the Transfiguration reminds us that in and through this person we call the Christ, the liberating power of the love of God can transform our lives into the splendor and wholeness and joy and freedom originally intended for us - and not for only us, but for our whole world. *Amen.*