

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, February 19, 2023

Matthew 16:24-17:8

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he 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!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Ebenezer Bryce was a famous Cattle Man who ran his herds on the land that is now Bryce Canyon National Park. Few people can stand on the Canyon's Rim, look down at the Majestic scene below and fail to sense all and inspiration. Bryce was asked what it was like to have spent his working life in a setting of such overwhelming natural beauty. The Cattleman replied " it's one heck of a place to lose a cow."

Seems like a strange reply to such beauty! But Bryce was more concerned with what he was doing than with such grandeur. His focus - his lens - was his cattle. Too often we too are blind to the beauty and wonder of life. Like Ebenezer Bryce, we let our concerns, our fear, our passion be the lens through which we see the world. Our text from Matthew this week represents a chance for us to step back and to perhaps begin to look with clarity all around us.

Transfiguration Sunday represents the halfway point on our journey from Christmas to Holy Week. Immediately preceding our passage today - the 16th chapter - Jesus foretold his own death and Resurrection. 6 days later - plenty of time for that to sink in - Jesus takes Peter, James and John, our fearsome 3 some away with him, ostensibly to pray. And there he was transfigured,

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, February 19, 2023

transformed – his face shone, his clothes shown – and two of the founding fathers of Judaism appeared with him in conversation. It's wild, it's dramatic, none of the disciples suspected what was going to happen. It was the quintessential Mountaintop experience.

We religious people toss about that phrase without really thinking about it. Throughout the Bible, people Retreat to mountains in an effort to encounter God. Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jesus. Mountains, especially mountaintops are understood as thin places – places for the boundaries between Heaven and Earth seemed a bit more porous.

Like many, Peter wants his dramatic Mountaintop experience to last - hence building permanent places, maybe even a retreat center! But God has vastly different plans. God's message sounds quite familiar to what was said from Heaven during Jesus's baptism. The biggest difference – God is speaking to the disciples, not Jesus. *This event is for their benefit!* And they are asked to listen. Something that disciples are not very good at doing.

Peter often acts as a stand-in for us; pointing out our inability or unwillingness to be in the moment. Peter rushes things, misunderstands, speaks when he should be silent. It is as if Peter's faux pas is what prompts God to wring God's hands and shout *listen for Pete's sake! Take a moment to slow down and listen. You're not going to get it until you be quiet! Why do you think you brought you up here in the first place?* And understandably, the disciples literally fall on their faces with fear and trembling. They have just gotten a rather harsh reminder of exactly who they are dealing with.

Sometimes we need that reminder too. Consider all the ways that we attempt to domesticate God. We have our image, our Idol, the God we are familiar with, comfortable with, placated by. We are vastly more comfortable with the Jesus that is meek & mild, the shepherd with a single lamb upon his shoulders, the Jesus who comforts us but doesn't expect too much of us.

We don't often spend our time contemplating the Jesus that overturns tables & brandishes a whip, the Jesus that compares the syrophenician woman to a dog, who looks a grieving disciple in the face and says "let the dead bury the dead; you go proclaim the kingdom of God." But that is who Jesus is as well. And we cannot let the veil of our own comfort and complacency take precedent and blind us forever.

We often forget, but we do not come into this building, come to this place to only be made comfortable. God is constantly pushing our boundaries. I truly believe that if you aren't disturbed by the gospel - you're not listening.

We can really see this in the selection the Narrative Lectionary uses for the Transfiguration. We don't start at the first verse of chapter 17. The Narrative Lectionary forces us to look at the Transfiguration through the lens of the cross and a christian's call to self-denial. "What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their lives?" That flies in the face of how our world understands power and might. The same God who is bathed in awe and majesty engages the world, not through might, but through self-denial.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, February 19, 2023

Seeing as God sees - through the veils that blind us - forces us to wrestle with things about ourselves and our world. To truly see in justice and inequality and not be numbed to it. To really be present with the people on the margins that we've trained our eyes to look over and even through. To know in the depths of our being that we must be as concerned with "the least of these" as we are with ourselves.

We can't leave Transfiguration to the mountaintops. We must see the world differently - we must see CLEARLY - with all our lenses and blinders removed - even when we come down from the heights. Jesus challenges us to see the world differently - to be different - to choose different. **In that moment, the veil is lifted enough for us to see the way God sees.** The Transfiguration story with all its mystery and power can keep us from making Jesus too small. It is a stark reminder of the awesome power and might of the God we worship, the God who calls us to difficult and dangerous things.

Annie Dillard puts a finer point on it. "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets! For the sleeping God May awake someday and take offense, or the waking God May draw us to where we can never return."

Today we are once again reminded that God is calling us to live differently - to see differently.. Like the disciples, we encounter God and those experiences change us - allowing us to see God everywhere.

As we begin our Lenten journey this week, we'll explore more in depth what Jesus tells us it means to be followers of God - to very literally take up our cross and follow. But as we stand at the precipice today, we know this: God is asking us to slow down and to listen. God is transfiguring us. And through us - the world.

There is a wonderful image in the last Harry Potter book that helps here. Toward the beginning of the story, Harry is attending the wedding of two dear friends Bill and Fleur. Fleur is one of those girls that is so beautiful, that her beauty usually eclipses those around her. Harry's best friend Ron has difficulty forming words when she's near. Yet, on her wedding day, Fleur wears a magical Tiara, one that transfigures all those around her. She is no longer the center of attention. Instead, everyone around her seems to Glow. "While her radiance usually dimmed everyone by comparison, today it beautified everybody it fell upon". Her presence renders others beautiful and guests cannot understand how they never noticed it before, how the faces of those around them shine.

When we gather in the presence of God, we shine with light from within - light that comes from our creator. That is not a light we can keep to ourselves- but rather one that is called to help the faces of those around us shine.