

Transfiguration Sunday

Ex.24:12-18 Ps.99 Matt. 17:1-9

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Feb. 15, 2025

As I was thinking about Matthew's account of Jesus' transfiguration this week, a story came to mind I've often used to speak of the meaning of baptism ... A story that all of a sudden seemed equally appropriate for Transfiguration Sunday...

It's a story I heard a Lutheran colleague tell in a sermon more than fifty years ago about an experience he had had some years earlier when, on his last day of vacation in Florence, Italy, he decided at the last moment to go and visit a church he hadn't yet seen... one of those ancient churches that attracts many tourists because of its history, its religious art, and its stained-glass windows. So, as my colleague said, when he entered the dimly-lit sanctuary, there were many people quietly moving through the space looking at all there was to see...

Which he began to do as well, when something caught his eye at the entrance, as through the door walked a tall dark-skinned woman in a golden colored robe and headdress... She walked slowly down the aisle, to the large stone baptismal font situated in the middle of the sanctuary, and put her hands on either side of the font...

So regal was the way she walked down the aisle and the way she stood there at the font that some people stopped their sight-seeing to watch her, particularly as the sun, at that very moment, shone through

the round window above the entrance door, landing squarely on the woman's golden robe and headdress, filling her with a radiance, as my colleague said, that was breathtaking...

And as if that wasn't enough, the woman then lifted her head and began to sing the African American spiritual "Deep River"... a spiritual born from both pain and anguish, the sound of her rich voice filling the sanctuary as she sang,

Deep river,

My home is over Jordan.

Deep River,

I want to cross over into campground.

And then, when the last note faded into silence, she paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and began singing the "Alleluia" from Mozart's "Exultate Jubilate," "her voice filling the space with such beauty," said my colleague, "that it was hard to tell if the radiance that shone from her was a radiance of sight or a radiance of sound..."

(Later in the day, as my colleague said in his sermon, he learned that the great American soprano Jessye Norman was in Florence to give a concert that evening... And he realized that it was Jessye Norman who had filled the sanctuary of the church that morning with her presence and her voice...)

Perhaps you can understand how I might see a connection between this story and Matthew's account of Jesus' transfiguration,

especially as the sun, streaming through that sanctuary window, focused on Jessye Norman to a point so rich in light (and I dare say love), it turned to flame... a **visual epiphany of sorts** not unlike the one Peter, James and John had on the mountain that day in the presence of Jesus when he too took on a radiance as bright as the sun...

But this past week, as I read Matthew's account of the Transfiguration for the umpteenth time, I realized (in light of my colleague's story about Jessye Norman's brilliance in both sight and sound) that I have been so completely dazzled by what Matthew invites us to **see** in his account of the Transfiguration, that I have largely ignored what he invites us to **hear**...

Forgetting completely that my singing teacher Eva Lakova used to say with some regularity, "Elaine, remember that singing is first a **listening** activity..."

Forgetting completely that whenever Martin Luther drew a picture of a Christian, he drew a picture of an **ear**...

Forgetting completely that in the beginning God **spoke** creation into existence saying, "Let there be light..." Or as John the Gospel writer later put it, "In the beginning was the **word**..."

Forgetting completely that the most important verse in all of the Hebrew scriptures is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5; those verses known as the "Shema" which read, "**Hear**, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"...

(The word "Shema" in Hebrew meaning "hear" or "listen" not just in the sense of sound perception, but in the deeper sense of paying

attention, understanding and acting upon what is heard... A word repeated again and again by the prophets who were forever calling the people of Israel to “Shema,” to listen... to hear...)

The thing is, if we read Matthew’s account of Jesus’ transfiguration with not only our eyes open, but our ears as well, we will realize that there is a lot to **hear**... The voice of God, for one thing, as God speaks of Jesus from the cloud saying “This is my son, with whom I am well pleased” ... the very same words that sounded from the cloud when Jesus was baptized... Words that carry with them such a deep sense of relationship and belonging, such a complete sense of oneness that it’s as if God is saying, “This is my son, heart of my heart, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone... When you see him, you see me... and when you hear him, you hear me... listen to him...” “Listen to him,” the voice from the cloud says at Jesus’ transfiguration... ‘Shema’... Because following Jesus is first a listening activity...”

And then notice what the first words Jesus speaks are, even as Peter, James and John lay in fear and trembling on the ground... His first words are these... “Get up, and be not afraid... Get up, and be not afraid.”

The thing is, just prior to Jesus’ transfiguration in Matthew’s Gospel, the disciples heard Jesus speak those impossible words about taking up one’s cross and losing one’s life in order to save it... They had heard Jesus say that they would soon be on their way to Jerusalem, where those in the halls of political and religious power would do whatever they had to do to silence Jesus for good...

So there was already good reason for the disciples to be in a state of fear of trembling, not to mention the overwhelming sense of awe-struck terror they must have felt there on the mountain when God's presence in Jesus focused to a point so rich in light (and I dare say love), it turned to flame...

And into that time and place of fear, on the heels of God's declaration to listen to Jesus, Jesus **spoke** the two-part call that blazed at the heart of his being...

The first part calling the disciples to...

- **get up,**

and by extension,

- to **rise up,**

- and **wake up**

So they might, in the days to come...

- **stand up** to the powers of muscle and might that ruled the world,

- and **speak up** for those marginalized and dehumanized by the Ceasars, the kings, and all their weak-kneed lackies and their hard-hearted cronies...

"Get up," Jesus said... with the understanding that such "getting up" in his name would necessarily lead to a good deal of "uppity" behavior in resistance to the powers that be...

These were the first words Jesus spoke to his disciples that day on the mountain, after God's voice sounded from the cloud calling them to **listen** to what Jesus said...

Followed by the second part of Jesus' message... "Be not afraid"... "Be not afraid"... Not because there was nothing to be afraid of... Jesus knew that all too well... But because there was something else... Something else to **hear** in the midst of the fear...

And the best way I know how to speak of what that something is, is to remember a Sunday morning at Redeemer Lutheran Church in 2009 when we called 19-year-old Paul, a young man who had grown up in the congregation, up front for a blessing just before he was to be deployed to Iraq...

Paul's father had died of a heart-attack when Paul was about 10, leaving him to be the "man of the family"... a support to his mother who had three younger children to raise out on a remote piece of land in Dixmont...

Paul's teenage years weren't easy, and so when he graduated from high school the only good option he saw for himself was to enlist in the army... which he did...

Putting aside all opinions about the Iraq war itself, I just want to say that everyone at Redeemer Lutheran Church knew we were sending one of our own... a boy we had grown to love so much over the years... to war...

And so on the Sunday before he was to leave home, we called him up front... And we spoke words we wanted him to **hear**... and not just in the sense of sound perception, but in the deeper sense of paying

attention, and taking in what is heard... What we said, (or more accurately, what I said on behalf of the congregation) was this...

First, I traced on his forehead a cross, repeating the most beautiful line in the sacrament of baptism, saying, “Paul, beloved child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever...”

And then I read the small little poem by Langston Hughes that reiterates the meaning of that baptismal declaration with a fierceness and a defiance nothing in this world can take away... not even the horrors of war... These words...

*Gather out of star-dust,
Earth-dust
Cloud-dust
And splinters of hail,
One handful of dream-dust
Not for sale.*

Those words, followed just a few minutes later by the words I spoke as I put into the hand of our boy going off to war, “Paul, the body of Christ, broken for you... The blood of Christ shed for you...”

And what I hoped so desperately was that when Paul was far from home and compelled to see and do what war compels young people to see and do... **when there was no divine light to provide an Epiphany on a holy mountain...when there was no visual assurance of God’s love to cling to, what I hoped was that Paul could still hear somewhere deep inside himself those words of claiming love his faith community had**

spoken over him in worship that morning... And in such hearing he would know, in the midst of the terrors that raged around and within him, that he wasn't alone...

Because, as the ears of his heart would remind him, the God made known in Jesus, who accompanies us into the most God-forsaken times and places imaginable + was with him too,

Gathering right then and there,

Gathering in the midst of war,

In the middle of Iraq...

Gathering out of star-dust,

Earth-dust

Cloud-dust

And splinters of hail,

One handful of dream-dust

Not for sale.

(A promise spoken to all of creation... a promise spoken to each and every child of God... whatever wars, internal or external any of us may be in, as God calls to each of us, "Shema"... "listen...You are one handful of dream dust not for sale...")

It was this kind of word Jesus spoke to Peter, James and John that day when he said, "be not afraid"... hoping they would hear it deep enough in their bones to transfigure their hearts... And it is the same kind of word Jesus speaks to us in the fears and uncertainties of our days...

Goodness knows... sometimes that word is very hard to hear... Ask the disciples and they will tell you it is so...

Which is why, I will leave you with three little words of wisdom passed on to me from those who have heard the “be not afraid” of God...

First, from a dear friend who once said to me when I was going through a hard time, “Did you know, Elaine, that the word ‘listen’ and the word ‘silent’ are composed of the very same letters?” As if to suggest I might stop talking for a bit, and just listen...

Secondly, from Beethoven, who, when he had lost all sense of hearing, sawed the legs off his piano, got down on the floor, put his ear to the ground, and listened to the vibrations in the floor as he played... As if to suggest that sometimes the sound of God’s love is carried in ways and places so low to the ground it’s almost scandalous... Not “godly” at all, in the regular “godly” sense of the word...

And lastly from my pastor friend who told the story of Jessye Norman ablaze with light in that church in Florence... the pastor who taught me to be ready at any minute for the unexpected presence of God to shine forth in ways that can be both seen and heard...

That presence focused to a point so rich in light (and I dare say love) it turns to flame... Suggesting it could be now... this morning... even as we open our hands to receive the bread and wine and our ears to hear the words, “The body of Christ, broken for you... The blood of Christ shed for you...”

For you, for you... Shema... listen... for you...

Get up, wake up, rise up, stand up, speak up, and be not afraid.
Because you are "*one handful of dream-dust not for sale.*"