

Linda Driver

Athelstone Uniting Church #188

19 February 2023

Text: Matthew 17:1-9 (The Voice)

Theme: **Sacred Encounters** (Transfiguration)

Background: The Season after the Epiphany closes with an extraordinary sacred encounter on an ordinary mountain, and we are invited to carry God's glory and mystery as we enter the Season of Lent.

The Transfiguration is an awesome moment in scripture. With the disciples, we are witnesses to Jesus' light. In the Season after the Epiphany, we've journeyed with Jesus as he lived the light of God's love among us. As this season draws to a close, we are challenged to carry that light forward.

I'll be linking this to three of our B's: Beloved, Behave, and Be



In this moment, in this place...

What moment do we find ourselves in today?

In the church calendar, it is Transfiguration Sunday – the Sunday between Epiphany and Lent.

We're at the end of the star gazing, the aha moments, the season of light and we are preparing to follow Jesus, the human Jesus, as he lived and moved and breathed among us, teaching and healing and stirring things up!

Let me tell you a little about Lent for us Athelstone:

We begin this Wednesday with an opportunity to pray. It is Ash Wednesday. The church will be set up with a Labyrinth to walk (or hand labyrinths to use for those who find that difficult) and self guided prayers to follow.

Come anytime between 3.00 and 4.30pm or between 7.00 and 8.30pm – the times are in your newsheet.

Then to help in your discipleship journey during Lent, there will be several resources for you to make use of as you wish.

You may have already downloaded the Lent Prayer Action Calendar, provided by the Synod. There are lots of ideas for prayer and action. I hope they will provoke you to think and pray about what God is calling you to do during Lent.

I will be preaching on the theme of "Where your heart is". The theme's inspiration comes from Jesus' teaching in his Sermon on the Mount about storing treasures. we'll be invited to wonder more deeply about what kinds of treasure matter, why we store treasures, and the power these treasures have in our lives.

Rev Dr Sarah Agnew will get you thinking on this when she comes to preach next week.

We will also have a Prayer Resource from Lent Event, which will guide your prayers for our ministry partners overseas.

Look out for these resources next week.

And now let's return to this moment on the mountaintop...

In this moment, in this place, all is wonder, all is grace.

Oh to have such a moment..

With Jesus on a mountaintop

To have such a moment,

Witnessing Jesus in all his glory!

What a moment it was!

Each year, on transfiguration Sunday, we try to imagine what it could have been like. We compare it to mountaintop experiences we have had – so powerful that we can still picture them in our mind’s eye.

We remember times that we have been on a mountaintop, looking out over a beautiful vista, the experience of a ‘thin place’, where we feel so close to God.

We think of moments when we have our breath taken away as we watch a sunset – or sunrise – and delight in the magnificent colours, as rays of light paint glorious patterns across the sky.

At home, in the manse, my favourite chair has a gorgeous view. I can see out the window, facing west. I occasionally see koalas in the gum trees. Often I see the most beautiful sunsets. Paul took this photo (*holding slide image*) of my view a few days ago.

Sometimes the light comes in at such an angle that it is blinding.

That kind of blinding light, is what I picture when I think of the experience that Peter, James and John shared that day up on a mountain with Jesus.

Madeleine L’Engle (MAD:lin LENG:gl.) wrote about this in her poem Transfiguration. I often come back to this poem at this time of year:

Suddenly they saw him
the way he was,
the way he really was
all the time,
although they had never
seen it before,
the glory which blinds
the everyday eye
and so becomes invisible.

This is how
he was, radiant, brilliant,

carrying joy
like a flaming sun
in his hands.

This is the way he was—is—
from the beginning,
and we cannot bear it.

So he manned himself,
came manifest to us;
and there on the mountain
they saw him, really saw him,
saw his light.

In her poem, L'Engle (LENG:gl) talks about the glory that blinds the everyday eye. It is this glory that we hear about whenever God is present among people. The glory that makes God impossible to look at – blinding, terrifying... the same glory that had Abram (Gen 17:3), Joshua (Joshua 5:14), and Ezekiel (1:28; 3:23) throw themselves facedown to the ground.

L'Engle (LENG:gl) describes Jesus as though he always is like that: reflecting the glory of God - yet veiled so we can look upon him...

“Suddenly they saw him, really saw him, saw his light..”

In this moment, Jesus is transfigured – literally, to change shape or form, in such a way that reveals his glory, dramatically showing the disciples his true identity as the son of God.

They knew Jesus was special, but they were never quite sure what that meant. By wrapping Jesus in a shiny cloud and incredible clothes, God was telling the disciples, “Jesus is more than a special person. Jesus is God with you.”¹ And just like Moses long before, Jesus became shiny all over while he was in God’s presence.

¹ <http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2013/01/year-c-transfiguration-of-lord-february.html>

Wonder. Awe... majesty. Power... fear.... All caught up in this story.

Peter didn't want this moment to end, and offered to build three shelters. How often have we been caught up in such a wonderful moment, that we don't want it to end, and don't want to leave?

"Don't just do something. Stand there!" is a quote variously attributed to Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit and among others.

If only faith were like this every day! If only we could stand in the presence of Jesus and other great people of faith and bask in the mystery and glory of God.

It is important to stop and appreciate and wonder and worship. To simply Be!

What good though would Peter and his mates be to the rest of the world if they remained stuck there in that moment?

What good would we be to the rest of the world if we remained in worship, on a mountaintop, or within these walls, having a grand time celebrating our wonderful God? Stuck in such a moment?

Mountaintop experiences can be an important part of our Christian experience. They bring us hope in our darker days. They give us greater confidence and assurance in sharing the good news in the world – like Peter, witnessing to what he had seen on that mountain - news to be shared with those who have not yet experienced what we have! ..news to be shared with those who are in the valleys of life..

Being in the moment was important, but so was coming back down that mountain, transformed. And so does heading back out into the world, having been transformed – with a new perspective on what we see and what we do.

We may experience encounters with our amazing, glorious, mysterious God of light and love who changes us, transforming who we are.

They might not change our outward appearance, but they do change who we are, becoming the people God created us to be.

We then shine the light of Christ to those around us, as we ground our lives in God's love.

I see the transfiguration story in two ways:

A story that captures the glory of Jesus

And a story that captures the humanity of Jesus

I have been talking about the glory and awe and wonder of the story as Jesus was revealed in his full glory. With Matthew placing him in the company of Elijah and Moses. Helping the people of his community to see Jesus in the light of a new Moses. With God-encounters on a mountain.

This is the transcendent God – the God who is almighty, all powerful, all-knowing, creator

And then the story changes, the blinding light, the cloud and Elijah and Moses have gone, leaving just Jesus.

Just Jesus.

In this moment, Jesus says: look up, don't be afraid!

In this moment, Jesus touches them. The touch of a human hand. The voice of a comforting friend, who knew they would be afraid.

This is the imminent God – the one who is God-with-us in human form – Jesus.

The one who heads down the mountain with the disciples.

The one who suffers, for us.

Peter's idea to set to set up camp on the mountain and stay in that glorious moment is not what Jesus is about.

He's here to be human, among humans.

He came to set up camp and dwell among *us*.²

Elizabeth Waldron Anstice writes that:

Throughout the gospel of Matthew we can read about Jesus doing lots of very ordinary human things as a human.

He is born in the usual way, with a vulnerable baby body; his family are afraid of the violent government trying to kill him and flee to another country; he hangs around with his cousin who baptises his whole body; he walks along the beach; his body gets hungry and tired; he feels happy, cracks jokes, he's sometimes cheeky to people who think themselves too important, and feels compassion for people who are suffering; he gets hurt and feels pain in his body; all the human-bodied things.

He also does amazing beyond-human things, healing, knowing, providing food, but 99 percent of the time Jesus shows us how to be human.

This story of the Transfiguration takes us up a mountain to one of the very few times when Jesus shows the full glory of God, when his body is changed and for a short while doesn't look like a normal human body.

So how about that? Jesus could have walked around with an amazing gleaming glorious godly body all the time – but he didn't.

He did all of his teaching and healing and helping and sharing with an ordinary human body.

Face and feet, arms and legs, tummy and hands.

² Elizabeth Waldron Anstice: Transfiguration Sunday Year A - Bible and Prayer Resources for Intergenerational Worship. (intergen.org.au)

The best way for Jesus to show us he was God, was through his human actions! ³

Elizabeth has written a re-telling of the transfiguration story with this in mind.

So, here is the transfiguration story, told with plasticine people!

Transfiguration plasticene story

Read Elizabeth Waldron Anstice's plasticine story⁴ - see powerpoint



This picture that Paul took shows the glory of the sunset – but if you look closely in the foreground on the right, you can see the roof of my next door neighbour! And out of sight, is the clothesline!

The glory and the down-to-earth mundane nature of our lives, all in one picture!

This week as we step into the Season of Lent, on the journey towards Easter, may this Transfiguration moment of transcendence and imminence give us the hope and courage to go on, knowing that Jesus is with us, every step of the way. Amen

³ Elizabeth Waldron Anstice: Transfiguration Sunday Year A - Bible and Prayer Resources for Intergenerational Worship. (intergen.org.au)

⁴ <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Uhlx-Xf2xeDwFtPP9Vcf3ErtNiNhdJLs/edit#slide=id.p1>

Source: intergen.org.au

Sources:

Elizabeth Waldron Anstice: *Transfiguration Sunday Year A - Bible and Prayer Resources for Intergenerational Worship*. (intergen.org.au)

Seasons of the Spirit, Fusions *resource 13 WR Feb 19- 23 2023*

Madeleine L'Engle: *Transfiguration* from *Glimpses of Grace*

Carolyn C Brown *in Worshipping with Children:*

<http://worshippingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2013/01/year-c-transfiguration-of-lord-february.html>