

Transfiguration of Our Lord (RCL/A): "A Bit Touched"
Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9
February 19, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A few days ago Ned was leaving for an appointment and announced his departure by saying, "I'm off." We can kid with each other, so I said, "Maybe a **little** off, but not **too far** off." And he added, "Yeah, I think that's called 'a bit touched.'" 😊

Old-fashioned language, right, for someone who's a little out there, different in some quirky kind of way? The original meaning is that the person has been touched **by God**, **changed** by God, stamped with God's fingerprints.

In today's Gospel, the disciples closest to Jesus, Peter, James and John, are invited to walk up the mountain with Him. There they witness Him transformed, "transfigured," so that *"his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."* (Matthew 17:2) Startling, right? And not only that, who appears beside Jesus but Moses and Elijah! (I've always been curious how the disciples knew exactly who those heavenly guests were. It's not like they'd ever met, since Moses and Elijah lived centuries before. Was Moses carrying the two tablets with the 10 Commandments? Had Elijah arrived in the chariot that originally took him to Heaven, and parked it nearby?)

At this point, James and John are speechless, but Peter, as usual, isn't. He offers to build booths or erect tents, so they'll be comfortable and will want to hang around, I guess. He wants to freeze-frame this mountaintop experience, to make it last forever. We can probably identify. Think of a time or a place when you've felt closest to God, your own mini-mountaintop experience. In many cultures a mountaintop is considered a "thin place," where the veil between earth and heaven is especially sheer. There are other thin places, too,

“liminal” spaces, bordering the divine. These include pilgrimage sites like Iona in Scotland, Lindisfarne in England, Assisi in Italy, San Juan de Compostela in Spain, Chartres in France. And there are other places and times known only to you, where you have encountered the divine: holy ground where you’ve felt like you should remove your shoes, like Moses before the burning bush. Maybe your holy ground was a dream which reunited you with a loved one, as if they were alive rather than dead, here instead of gone. We don’t want those moments to pass. They are so precious we don’t want them to end.

So Peter apparently hopes if he can make Jesus, Moses and Elijah comfortable enough, they won’t ever want to leave. But mid-sentence, a bright cloud blocks out the sun, and Peter is interrupted – by God!

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”
(Matt. 17:5)

It’s an echo of the Voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism. The message has to be repeated, the Father’s “Good Housekeeping” seal-of-approval has to be re-emphasized, because the disciples are starting to wonder if Jesus is a little “touched” in the head. Right before their hike up the mountain, Jesus had told them for the first time about His upcoming suffering, death and resurrection. Peter’s immediate response was, “God forbid it!” The experience of seeing Jesus transfigured, of hearing the Father name Him again as the Son, the Beloved, the One to whom they should listen trustingly and follow obediently, is to fortify them for what lays ahead.

This visual and audible epiphany becomes too much for Peter, James and John. They keel over and cower in fear, so overwhelmed are they by their proximity to the holy and by their own unworthiness. But Jesus doesn’t tell them, “Man up!” Instead:

... 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. (Matt. 17:7-8)

Jesus' touch will transfigure those who saw Him transfigured: not all at once, but

eventually. **Jesus' touch transfigures everyone blessed to come in contact with Him.**

Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel:

- A leper expresses trust that if Jesus desires, He can heal him. *"Jesus stretched out his hand and **touched** him, saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed."* (Matt. 8:3)
- Jesus visits the home of Peter's mother-in-law and finds her in bed with a fever (maybe caused by malaria?). *"... [H]e **touched** her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him."* (Matt. 8:15)
- A religious leader begs Jesus to come to his home and call back from death his 12-year-old daughter. Jesus goes, has the disciples shoo away the noisy mourners, and enters the child's bedroom, approaching her bed. *"... [H]e went in and **took her by the hand**, and the girl got up."* (Matt. 9:25)
- 2 blind men approach Jesus and ask Him to restore their sight. *"Jesus said to them, 'Do you have faith that I can do this?' They said to him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then he **touched** their eyes and said, 'According to your faith, let it be done to you.' And their eyes were opened."* (Matt. 9:29-30)

We experience Jesus' touch through Word and Sacrament. In the laying on of hands and anointing of the sick, even in the imposition of ashes, we experience Jesus' touch. God has given us this story of the Transfiguration that we may know Who Jesus is, but also so we can be en-**courage**-d as we prepare to step off into Lent, filled with **courage** as we confront our sins, our failures in love toward God and neighbor, as we repent, turning away from darkness and toward the Light, as we strive to be "poor in spirit," by God's grace knowing our need of God more fully, more sharply, more dramatically, more viscerally.

I recently came across an interesting on-line spiritual resource called the Salt Project, a reference I'm sure to Jesus' command that we be "salt for the earth" (Matt. 5:13).

This is Salt's reflection on today's Scripture:

[Jesus'] path of love will lead down into the valley, through the dry cinders of Ash Wednesday and the tears of the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow... [R]emember that the journey through ashes and sorrow is never for its own sake. It's for the sake of what comes next. In a word, it's for the sake of transfiguration, a radiant new life and a dazzling new world.¹

The Greek word for transfiguration is *metamorphosis*. 'Makes us think of an egg that becomes a caterpillar that eats itself fat then weaves its own cocoon and eventually emerges as a butterfly. That can be a reference to Jesus' death and resurrection but it can also remind us of the beautiful transformation God plans for each of us, even in this life, a transformation more and more into Christ's likeness.

"Touched" by God, we will bear God's fingerprints, as surely as that unfinished painting, "St. Jerome in the Desert," bears one partial fingerprint of Leonardo da Vinci, its creator. God isn't finished with us yet either, but those with eyes to see can detect our Maker's mark, God-willing. Not only that, we are marked with the cross of Christ forever. On Ash Wednesday, everyone can see that cross. Let's think of it as God's fingerprint. This Lent, can we do something so generous or sacrificially faithful or so much like Jesus, that people will wonder, "Are you crazy?" If so, we can answer, "Yes, I'm happy to report I'm a bit 'touched.'" Amen

¹www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/2/18/transfiguration-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-transfiguration-Sunday.

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