

“I’m Coming Out” Rev. Michele Ward Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9
Transfiguration Sunday Year A Sunday, February 19, 2023
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD
Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSV)

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.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

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PRAYER: Holy God, mighty and immortal, you are beyond our knowing, yet we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ, whose compassion illumines the world. Transform us into the likeness of the love of Christ, who renewed our humanity so that we may share in his divinity, the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Six days after Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, he takes a few of his closest friends up to the top of a high mountain - Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. He does not take everyone with him. He wants to be far away from everyone else after the prophecy of his suffering, death, and resurrection. I wonder if he wanted to show them his true self. He went away from the rest of the group after a spiritually intense segment of teaching and preaching. The Queer Theology Bible podcast talks about this passage as the “coming out” of Jesus.¹ Much like when someone is coming out, they need their closest friends around them. They often need to tell the people they trust the most first.

Once they are up there on the mountain, Jesus changes. His clothes begin to shine with bright light. His face begins to glow like the sun. Not only that, Moses and Elijah, long dead, appear on the mountain and begin to talk to Jesus. He completely shows them who he is in all of his glory. He does not hide any of his power, any of his light, any of his majesty. Jesus displays his full divinity and his full humanity.

When someone comes out, this is what they are doing - whether this was you or someone else, you may recall what it feels like to fully be yourself in front of others you love and who love you. Podcast hosts Brian G. Murphy and Father Shannon TL Kearns argue, “this is why coming out in the queer community is so

¹Queer Theology Bible Podcast episode, “Transfiguration: Jesus Comes Out - Matthew 17:1-9” February 22, 2017 <https://www.queertheology.com/podcast/168/>

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important - we can’t fully be in a relationship with other people until we are fully known.”²

While Jesus reveals himself to the disciples, he also communes spiritually with his Jewish ancestors - Moses and Elijah. Moses, representative of the Law, and Elijah, representative of the Prophets. Jesus is the union of the Law and the Prophets, the union of the Human and the Divine. He cannot do what he is about to do in the next part of his life and ministry - everything he talked about in the previous chapter that would happen to him and to his disciples if they continue to follow him - without calling upon the wisdom of the Law and the Prophets, without seeking the guidance of Moses and Elijah. In his fullest self, Jesus shines brilliantly and emanates light. When he is most attuned to who he is, Moses and Elijah meet him on the mountain.

But this holy moment of communion and connection cannot last forever. Peter interrupts their conversation. He jumps in, saying, “Jesus, it is good that James, John, and I are here. I will build three shelters for the three of you on the top of this mountain.” Peter wants to keep the party going is often what commentators say about him. Others say he wants to make himself valuable. He needs to feel needed. I have even read analysis to the effect that Peter wanted attention, and sought to receive it by elevating himself.

I wonder something else. What if Peter wants to protect Jesus? After all, Jesus has prophesied some terrifying realities only a week prior to this mountain top. Imagine seeing your rabbi, friend, and leader functioning as his highest self. Away with you and a few close friends, communing with your guides and tapping into the spiritual wisdom that brings you energy and life. Wouldn’t you want it to keep on going indefinitely? Wouldn’t you want it to linger just a little bit longer? Perhaps if they stay up there, everything Jesus said

² Queer Theology Bible Podcast episode, “Transfiguration: Jesus Comes Out - Matthew 17:1-9” February 22, 2017 <https://www.queertheology.com/podcast/168/>

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last week might not come true. Perhaps they can enjoy this powerful and sacred time with their spiritual ancestors without any concern for what may await.

But before Peter could complete his proposal, a bright cloud overshadows all of them. From this cloud a loud voice says, much like it did at the baptism of Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” This moment recalls the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. A dove descends and a voice speaks from the heavens, saying words that almost exactly parallel these. Both his baptism and his transfiguration signify a transition in the life and ministry of Jesus - the beginning and the end of his three year ministry on earth.

Peter, James, and John were afraid. They fell on their faces, terrified of everything happening around them - the transformation of Jesus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the bright cloud and the bodiless voice calling out to them.

Jesus comes over to where they fell on the ground. He touches them and says to them first, “Get up.” He does not tell them to stop being afraid. He tells them to get up in spite of their fear, in spite of themselves. Next, Jesus emphasizes that they do not need to be afraid. Easy to say, Jesus, hard to do!

When they finally looked up, it was like nothing had happened. Jesus stood before them. Alone. The bright cloud - gone. The bodiless voice - gone. Moses - gone. Elijah - gone, too! The shining clothes and the glowing face - gone.

Jesus tells them to say nothing and to keep this event a secret until the resurrection - his resurrection, to be specific, the one he prophesied about only a week before this unexpected visitation from Moses and Elijah. For Jesus, the transfiguration was not something to broadcast in front of the rest of his followers. Unlike his baptism, this holy declaration of his belovedness and belonging to God happens in front of a handful of people. This is a vulnerable, intimate moment with Jesus and a few of his closest friends. This is

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the passage that sets the stage for the rest of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus now turns his face towards the city of Jerusalem and his impending death. Moses and Elijah visit with Jesus on the mountain top, giving him the courage he needs. The Transfiguration gives Jesus the strength to leave the mountain and head towards the Holy City.

But before we head down the mountain with Jesus, I’d like us to linger there for a moment. In fact, I’d like us to go back up to verse four when Peter jumps in and says, “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.” Peter does not deserve the bad reputation he often receives in this passage. Perhaps he isn’t being pushy, insecure, or arrogant when he walks up to Jesus and makes this offer. Perhaps he is sincere in his offer to create space and time for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to dwell on the mountaintop a little while longer. “What’s the rush?” he seems to suggest. “I’d be so happy to make that possible that I will stay and build them myself.”

Part of being in true relationship with one another is having the courage to be our full selves, like Jesus did as he prophesied about his death and resurrection with his disciples. He took this a step further and transformed into a being full of light and brilliance in front of Peter, James, and John. Although I referred to this full sequence as the ‘coming out’ of Jesus earlier, I am curious about what happens next. What happens when Jesus has his ‘coming back’ when he heads down to the rest of the disciples and the people waiting for him below?

When someone in our lives shows us who they really are, how do we respond? Do we acknowledge their vulnerability? Do we see the risk they have taken to bring us into these intimate parts of their lives? I want us to consider what it would be like to respond as Peter does. In our own way, we want to protect the people we love. We want to keep them safe from harm. Especially if we hear about the future danger before it happens, much like Peter. He does not

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want harm to befall his beloved Jesus. He does not want this time on the mountain to end. He sees Jesus, in all of his glory and grandeur, and wants to keep his beautiful life safe.

I see myself in Peter, and I wonder if you might as well. I often want to keep the people I love out of difficult or risky situations. I even want to cocoon them from the world’s troubles. Although I cannot do those things, much like Peter cannot build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. None of us can protect each other completely from harm and pain and trouble. But we can make transfiguration moments - holy moments of transcendence - possible with one another.

These are the kinds of segments of time where we are not distracted or concerned with the difficulties of the day, of the month ahead, of the moment before. We are free from distraction. What we want is pure connection. We want deep relationships where we can receive the vulnerability and the power of those we love, and we can offer them a brave space to fully reveal who they are. Peter’s desire to create shelters is human. It is a desire we know because we are human, too. We want to build a place where all can be the fullest expression of who God created us all to be - in our glory, in our light, in our transcendence.

We want a place, as the poet Siegfried Sasson says, where
*“Everyone suddenly burst out singing;/ And I was filled with such delight/
As prisoned birds must find in freedom/ Winging wildly across the white/
Orchards and dark green fields; on; on; and out of sight.*

*Everyone’s voice was suddenly lifted,/ And beauty came like the setting sun./
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror/ Drifted away ... O but every one/
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.³*

³ “Everyone Sang” by Siegfried Sassoon