

2 Peter 1:16-21 ~ Matthew 17:1-9

*It is Good for Us to Be Here*

February 23, 2020 ~ Transfiguration of the Lord ~ Receiving of New Members

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Scripture:*

We are about to hear a story this morning that is both familiar and strange. Familiar because it is read every year the Sunday before Lent begins. Yes: along with being Transfiguration Sunday, today is also Lent Eve. Unlike Christmas Eve, where visions of sugarplums dance in our heads, God jolts Peter James and John with the brightest vision and loudest voice of the whole Epiphany season. The grand finale reveal that is also so strange we haven't figured out how to commercialize or merchandise it...Yet. There are no transfiguration stockings to buy by the chimney, or chocolate Mt. Tabors to buy. Transfiguration sunglasses and water bottles might be forthcoming. This story begins with an ascent up a high mountain, six days later. That sequence of days and mountain set up for this story are biblical code for Hebrew ears. They recall Moses ascending Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. By Jesus' time, being led up a high mountain had come to signal a border zone where heaven and earth converge and anything can happen. Scary and exciting.

Are you ready? It is good for us to be here today, standing now at the trail head. I invite you to put on your spiritual hiking boots, fill up your water bottles, and don't forget the sunscreen—it's going to be very bright up there. More importantly, let's turn down or tune out those incessant yappy little voices in our heads, so that we are free to let Jesus lead us to the higher place we need to go.

*Sermon:*

"Lord, it is good for us to be here." Yes, Peter, you got that right. Even if you are interrupting Jesus' mystic conversation with Moses and Elijah. But could he leave it at that? Oh no. His excitement and enthusiasm got the better of him. He had to *do something*. So he says, "How about some booths, or tents—one for you, Jesus—and one for each of your buddies there?" Peter's idea about building three dwellings, or tents was not completely random. His "do something" response echoed the traditional gesture of hospitality given to other angelic visitations in the Old Testament. You may recall the feverish hospitality that Abraham mobilized when the three visitors appeared to him in the bright sunlight by the Oaks of Mamre to announce the coming miraculous birth of Isaac to aged Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18).

Yet God shushes Peter midsentence with a cloud (just like on Mt. Sinai) and God's own booming voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." I can imagine Peter talking back saying something like, "But God, are you sure you don't want me to run down the mountain right now and get my tools?" "Be still, Peter--Leave it with your first thought: Lord, it is good for us to be here." Absolutely. Breathe it in. Let yourself experience the revelation of the moment, whatever that may be. Give this moment, this experience of the holy, plenty of room. If you think about it, isn't that our ultimate gesture of hospitality? Listen. Unburden your mind and your hands: stop talking, planning, list-making, multi-tasking. Otherwise you will likely miss the moment. Even one this big and bold.

I hear in God's response to Peter, an echo of Jesus' word to Martha in response to her anger with Mary about being left to do all the hosting work, while her sister Mary was sitting at his feet, listening. Remember what Jesus told her? "Martha, Martha you are distracted and worried... Mary had chosen the better part." (Luke 10:38-42). Now, don't get me wrong... God knows we need people to set the table, cook the food, clean it up. How else could we enjoy our wonderful and fun Everybody's Birthday Party lunch today? The problem for Martha and the problem for Peter is when the holy work of hosting gets in the way of, or even eclipses, the holy word or vision God is giving to us in that moment.

It is good for us to be here, as the worshipping Body of Christ we call FPC. Here is where we can learn to listen to the spirit, learn from the prophets, and most of all from the prophet Jesus who came not to abolish, but to fulfill all prophecy. Matthew has been teaching us this message every Sunday throughout the season of Epiphany. This Transfiguration story, recounted in all three synoptic gospels, solidifies dramatically Jesus' role and purpose, fulfilling the Law (symbolized by Moses) and the Prophets (symbolized by Elijah). Jesus has been teaching us hard lessons that reshape us and challenge us to bring out the best in us—sometimes light we didn't even know we had. It is here we come, sometimes limping, wounded. We may be thrown to the ground in fear or confusion. But here is where Jesus can touch us and invite us to get up. And to rise up. The Greek verb in our story translated as "get up" where Jesus came and touched Peter, James, and John, saying "Get up and do not be afraid," is the same root as the word we will hear on Easter when the angel says to the women, "He is risen." Resurrection happens after we are knocked off our feet. Resurrection happens here.

It is good for us to be here, worshipping together. The word, "Worship" comes from the Anglo-Saxon "worth-ship." To worship means to see and to respond to the true worth of something—to recognize and adore the value of another. Whatever strange things happened up on that mountain: it was an extreme example of true worship. They saw and recognized Christ in all his glory. We are here every Sunday to try and do the same thing. It's so easy for our eyes to get completely glazed over by our own preoccupations, and distractions, by all the ugly we see in and around us. Worship helps us to be lifted out of our ordinary, dull routines and ruts, and see ourselves in a different light. When we come to worship, we place ourselves where the beauty of God can break through and reach down to us—whether we feel like it or not.

It is good for us to be here in another sense—it is good for us, the church we call FPC, to be here, as we do our best to be a change agent in our community, that transfigures our town and our world to shine with the love and justice made known through Christ. Whether we are helping with the work of feeding hungry people through SOS or the NOW program, or advocating for children who are poor, homeless, or separated from their parents at the Southern border through our REUNIR project. Or every time we loan out a piece of medical equipment for injured and hurting people all over our community. I have also been recently struck by the quiet yet consistent and sustaining ministry of hospital visitation, transportation, and meals to folks in our community. Becoming a "Matthew 25 church" is now calling us to listen for how God is

calling us to extend the Love of Christ to the least, the lost, the forgotten, or dismissed in ways that promote systemic transfiguration.

This healing power of God's forgiving love is something the world cannot give. Last Wednesday I saw this power in vivid display at the First Presbyterian Church in Arpin. This was a moment where, "*Lord, it was good for us to be there,*" nearly 500 of us packed into that tiny church for a reason no one there could have anticipated. Yes, I am talking about the funeral for Mark Smith, a man who had been raised in that church, at age 41 was killed instantly in a traffic accident on Highway 10, near Arpin and Auburndale. The fatal crash was caused by a young man, a 16-year old new driver.

The moment I want to share with you was just past the time the funeral had been set to begin. The pews were bursting with people of all ages, people were standing on the sides, in the side rooms and downstairs. Many had already been there over two hours. The line to greet the bereaved family still snaked around the sanctuary and beyond. Visitation hours had been extended to give more people in line the chance to greet the family. All were waiting patiently with subdued conversation murmuring throughout the room. Then all of a sudden, we heard guttural female cry, and a young man sobbing. All eyes were drawn to those heart wrenching sounds. The air became suddenly close--the oxygen in the room spent. The young man who had caused the accident had just approached the Smith family, and was being embraced by them. The tension in the room continued to rise. It almost felt like a fight was about to break out.

But then Mark's sister, Beth, stood up and addressed the crowd with a loud and clear voice saying, "This is the house of God. We are here because we are a people of forgiveness." The mood calmed, like Jesus commanding the storm to be still, as it threatened to capsize their boat. I was moved to tears by the depth of her faith, and her family's. We all soon learned from the pastor during his funeral sermon that the day after the accident, that Sunday, the Smith/Murphy family had gone over to the young man's home to express words of forgiveness and grace. That family was listening to Christ. That family, with their hearts in pieces, knew how to get up how to rise up even in the eye of the storm of this tragedy. Their faith had taught them to be Easter people. People who know that Love ultimately wins.

Yes, it was good for us to be there at the Arpin church that day. It was good for all of us to be there together in a place where forgiveness is spoken, seen, and heard. Grace doesn't make the pain go away. Grace doesn't try to explain the unexplainable. Nor does grace minimize or trivialize a loss too big for words. But the healing power of Christ, our dazzling and our wounded savior, was at work in the hearts of all who had gathered there on a Wednesday afternoon.

We are facing some pretty dark narratives these days. But right here in our dazzling, crazy, strange, and familiar story we see light, if we look for it. Light breaking through that doesn't make the hurt magically disappear or go away. But it makes the hurt bearable, doable, mendable—redeemable. To share the world's suffering and to redress its wrongs. Together, to get just a little more right. That is God's way. "It's the one light you have in a dark time as you

wait for daybreak and the rising of the Morning Star in your hearts.” That’s what we heard this in our first reading from 2 Peter. Words written as though the Apostle Peter actually wrote them, but more likely, written by another author using the Apostle Peter’s name. This was a common practice at the time, to add to the authority to the document. He was telling the story as if it were his own, because it had become the community’s story. The transfiguration story had become a first-hand experience and reference point for the community in its seeing and hearing Jesus’ message in their own lives.

What is our first hand story? The glory of God is planted deep within each of us. And now this very morning, with 11 new members, God will transfigure us in new ways yet to be revealed. The more we lean into God, the more that glory will be revealed. The more we listen to God’s Beloved Son, as individuals and as a church, the more hospitable we are to the voice of Christ, the more we can hope to be transfigured into whom God has created us to be. When we do this, heaven and earth will converge. We are the ones who are here now. Yes, it is good for us to be here. Christ is here. Let us listen to him.