

Last Sunday in Epiphany  
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Transfiguring Compassion  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina, the Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor, recalled a wedding he attended. He wasn't the officiant and was seated with the congregation of the dearly beloved who had gathered to witness and celebrate the couple. He writes he was distracted because the person he was sitting next to was taking pictures during the ceremony and kept looking at the pictures they had just taken, seemingly impressed with their own amateur photography skills. They were constantly showing those pictures to other guests seated around them. This person was so focused on their pictures, they missed the significance of the event. Even though they were there in person, they were not in the moment.

We can easily see the similarities between the person obsessed with their pictures at a wedding and Peter in today's Gospel. When witnessing a profound moment in Jesus' life, Peter seems guilty of wanting to capture and preserve that moment for as long as possible instead of being fully present and letting it reveal deeper truths about Jesus.

I don't want to be too hard on Peter. After all, I am sure he was not expecting anything like what happened: to see Jesus so close to God in prayer he was physically changed. It must have been overwhelming. No one would know the correct etiquette in that situation. It is a normal response to try and pause such an event, if only to attempt to create more time to try and figure it out. But that is not something any of us can actually do. Sometimes all we can do is hang on as best we can, try to pay attention, and let the moment happen.

The moment of transfiguration is an especially significant one in the Gospels. Three of the four Gospel writers record this event, with very little variation, which has led Biblical scholars to conclude it did happen. It is historical, not theoretical, or allegorical. And while it didn't last long, Jesus' transfiguration did reveal a lot.

To unpack it all, we need to step back a bit and note when the transfiguration occurred in Matthew's Gospel, which is much later than what we have been hearing the last few Sundays. We are no longer in the context of Jesus giving his Sermon on the Mount, although Jesus is on a mountain. Now there are only three disciples with him, not a large crowd. A lot has happened since the delivery of the Sermon on the Mount, and we have moved from the first part of Matthew's Gospel to the beginning of the end of it. At this point in the Gospel, the disciples had heard most of the stories and parables Jesus told, they had witnessed his miracles of healing and feeding. They had traveled

with him, seen him walk on water and make raging storms suddenly disappear. Just before Jesus took the three disciples up the mountain, he asked them who they thought he was and Peter had given the right answer: the Messiah, the Son of God. But when Jesus told his disciples that means enduring suffering and death then rising to new life, Peter rebuked him. Which might be why Jesus invited him to join him on the mountain for prayer.

In this part of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus was preparing for what would lead to his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Because that is what it means to be God's Son, and that is what the transfiguration reveals. The transfiguration is in one moment all of who Jesus is, what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen.

One of the first things we notice about the Transfiguration is Jesus is flanked by Moses, the giver of the law who led the people of God into liberation and Elijah, the prophet who repeatedly called God's people to return to a right relationship with God. Their presence can be interpreted as Jesus fulfilling the law and the prophecies. The location of where they are standing, one on each side of Jesus, is also a prediction of the crucifixion, where Jesus will be flanked by two criminals. The fulfillment of the law and prophets is somehow part of the crucifixion. He will follow them, even when people will punish, torture, and kill him for it.

Another significant part of the transfiguration is Jesus was literally glowing. His clothes suddenly seemed to be made of light, not just sunlight or candlelight or neon lights, but a radiance. Many interpret this as evidence of Jesus' divinity, and perhaps this radiance is also a foreshadowing his resurrection, the love and life that defeats death and is so wonderful, so good, so powerful it cannot be contained, it shines out of Jesus like sunshine.

Then there was the cloud and the voice from heaven, bringing us back to the beginning and Jesus' baptism, suggesting this why Jesus came to us. To incarnate the love of God that will fulfill the law and prophets, even when that means suffering pain and death, and in so doing defeat the power of death and rise, bringing new life to the world.

It's all there in that one moment. It's a lot. No wonder Peter and the other disciples couldn't take it all in. No wonder they were so afraid their physical strength failed them, and they fell to the ground.

And then it was over. Like so many significant moments in life it didn't last long. Then Jesus was there. No longer visibly radiating light, but perhaps no different than he had been before.

One of my favorite parts of the transfiguration is when Jesus reached down to his disciples, gently touched them, and told them not to be afraid. Maybe he realized it was too much too soon for them. Maybe he learned they were not ready to see him in all his glory. Whatever Jesus realized, I like how after he challenged them, he comforted them by reminding them he was still there with them. We might all do well to remember any time we share something challenging, we have an opportunity to be like Jesus and temper it with compassion and comfort.

Speaking of challenging, the transfiguration also serves the purpose of signaling a transition in the Gospel from the ministry of Jesus to his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. That is why every Sunday before the start of the season of Lent, a time the Church sets aside to prepare for Easter, we remember the Transfiguration. Lent can be challenging for those who do not like to focus on our need for forgiveness. There is always that temptation to ignore such things and stay in the false security of the nostalgia of a past we create for our own comfort. But to do so is like focusing on the picture you took instead of letting yourself be present to the moment at hand. It might feel good, but you could miss the holy.

Perhaps the significance of the transfiguration for us today as we approach Ash Wednesday and Lent is that when God gives us difficult challenges, God also gives us comfort. That comfort might be in the hug of a friend, a kind word, a bit of beauty, whatever reminds us to not be afraid. There could be any number of ways God's compassion manifests alongside challenges that we can notice when we stay in the moment, which is where Jesus is, in that moment with us.