

Feast of the Transfiguration, Year A
Matthew 17:1-9
“There’s More to the Story”

Every year Beloit College releases a survey cataloging the mindset of its entering class in hopes that it will help professors and staff better “understand” their incoming students. And the findings—well, to say the least—are somewhat sobering. For the new students of the past two years cut and paste does not involve scissors and Elmer’s glue; rather, it’s computer lingo for editing a paper with the click of a button. This class has also never rolled down a window. They’ve only pressed a button. Nelson Mandela has never been in jail, and there are no memories of a man struggling against the injustice of apartheid. Michael Jackson is not the genius behind the “Thriller” album, but the not-quite-stable celebrity on *Entertainment Tonight*. In fact, they weren’t even born when the album was released. Wait, it gets better. The Soviet Union has never existed and the televangelist Jimmy Swaggert has never shed tears on television. In fact, they’ve never seen Johnny Carson live on television. And for you football fans, Madden is not a Superbowl-winning coach, only the name of a video game. And to top it off, movie producer Oliver Stone has brought them news about JFK and Malcolm X, not Walter Cronkite.

After sharing this with a friend of mine we collectively sighed and mused, “those were the days.” Of course, my wiser and more mature friends have reminded me that I’m really not that far removed from the subjects of the Beloit College study. But we all have memories of some sort—memories of the days when things were different, were better. When things were simpler and people were nicer. When we wrote thank you letters instead of quick emails, or worse text messages. When customer service wasn’t a marketing phrase, but a way of being. When the

economy was good and people actually believed that they could retire at a decent age. When the cost of an education was semi-affordable. We love to remember the good 'ole days. We love to feel good about the past, if only to relieve us of the anxiety of the present moment and what may lie ahead.

But of course, I've only told you half of the story about that survey. The other half is that change has brought us relationships we couldn't have dreamed of. Although we still have a ways to go, we've made inroads in stamping out injustices in our society. And technology has made it easier to reconnect and keep up with people across vast distances. But the fact of the matter is when we are in the midst of our routine and what we know as familiar, changing our outlook, our way of being can be hard. Even scary at times, especially when what you have been so accustomed to has been challenged.

In our Gospel lesson for this Feast of the Transfiguration we join the story of Peter, James, and John as they confront their own understanding of what it means to be a disciple. For a while now, these three young men have been accompanying Jesus as he has preached and healed people throughout Galilee. They witnessed his Sermon on the Mount when he declared that those who are suffering and mourning are not forgotten, but blessed; when he said that those who seem to be on an endless journey for righteousness will indeed find fulfillment. Our friends Peter, James, and John have been with Jesus as he taught them how to pray the prayer we say each week in our Eucharist and when he told the world not to judge others, but to have mercy instead. So it would seem that they know Jesus pretty well. They had amassed a comfortable relationship. Yes, Jesus

was radically transforming the way people thought and acted, and yet there was more to Jesus' story, and therefore *their story*.

See, right before we meet Jesus and three of his disciples we find Jesus has shared with them that part of his mission was also to suffer and die—to overcome death and to help inaugurate a new kingdom. And Peter wasn't standing for it—no, not his Lord! Maybe it was too abrupt a change. Maybe it was throwing a kink into how the disciples thought things were supposed to be. They were expecting someone strong and mighty. Not someone meek and mild. Maybe they didn't know there was more to the story.

And so Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain where we meet them today. And while they are there they have an encounter with Jesus that they had never had before. This carpenter-turned-preacher becomes dazzling white. And yet at that very moment, instead of totally beholding the glory of God on earth, Peter wants to build safe place for it, to preserve it. Of course, Peter was used to building homes to contain God's glory. They did it for Moses and they did it for Elijah. But that's the first part of the Christian drama. And this is the rest of the story. The life of Jesus and the life of Christian discipleship—then and now—is not safe. And it's different with Jesus. Jesus' glory was not to be contained but to be revealed to the world—which meant Peter, James, and John—and you and I—simply can't stay the same despite our best efforts to compartmentalize and organize our lives on our calendars and PDA's—I know I do. We must be open to the Spirit's movement at the most unexpected times. For the story of our lives that begins at our baptism is not one that can be reduced to our comfort, our habit, and our routines—at least not all the time. When we are baptized and every time we come forward to this

altar to receive and celebrate the grace of God we are commanded and strengthened to live as people whose lives are not dictated by circumstance, but God's grace working through our circumstances to transform us and the world. When we are so afraid of change as Peter was, when we fail to hear and follow the Spirit's movement we miss the opportunities God tries to show his love and mercy. We end up trying to solve the problem and mysteries around us and forget that God is already God and wants us to trust him not outdo him. That's not to say we won't suffer or have hard times. And I won't dare try to give a pithy explanation for those events that shaken us, but I will say this: God is with us in those moments, holding us up and promising that there is more to the story.

You see, right as Peter is preparing to contain a dwelling place for the glory, God stops him and James and John in their tracks. "This is my Beloved. Listen to him." Not get to work, not anything but listen to him. Let go of your plan and expectation and listen. Listen and follow me and I'll take you to places that you've never been. And it was only when Peter stopped talking and started listening to the voice of God that he got it. There was more to the story. And yes he was afraid for he knew not what lie ahead. He thought he had been following Jesus, a great leader, teacher, and preacher. But Jesus was more than that. He was greater than that. He was God in human flesh. He was love personified—not the Hallmark ooey-goey kind of love, but the love that welcomes everyone as they are—shame and secrets and all. The God who finds everyone precious and beautiful at every age. The God who overcomes death and the competitive ways of the world. The God who always has the last word in our lives.

But for the disciples to get this—and for us too—they had to let go of their past expectations, their ways of thinking that things happened only a certain way, that they had it all figured out. They had to trust Jesus with their lives, their hopes, and their dreams. They had to believe that Jesus' glory was enough, that there was more to come—that they could let go of that mountaintop experience and everything before it and start living life in trenches. They had to reconsider *who they were following*.

And just like the disciples wanted to stay on the mountain and contain Jesus' glory, we often want to stay there, too. But we have transformative experiences not so that we can merely hold on to them, but so that they can give us just enough strength to go on. We have these experiences not just for the sake of having them, but to be reminded that this world is not our home, that we are meant for more than we can suppose.

On this Wednesday we will embark upon the season of Lent. In the routine that is our lives, may we have the courage not to believe in our strength and ability to micromanage our past experiences, but in the power and love of God to reveal himself in our darkest moments and to show forth his glory when we least expect it. Can Jesus be both savior and fellow sufferer? Can he be both friend and healer? You have to let him try. You have to lift up your heart and your eyes and your hands to receive.

So don't give up. Don't be overwhelmed by your duties and your limitations. Don't believe the hype that this is as good as it gets. You may be stuck at the bottom of the mountain, in the routine and monotony of your life. Or you may be trying to hold on to that mountaintop

experience, wanting more, thinking nothing good will ever happen again. But there's more to the story. There's more to **your** story. And the best my friends, is yet to come.