

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany/February 26, 2017

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I sometimes say if you don't want to change don't come to church, because the spiritual life will change you. Love will change you. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, you might get turned around. Or Joshua on Mount Sinai you might find yourself prepared for a promised land, a new beginning. Or Peter, James, and John on Mount Tabor, you could be given an insight into the very nature of God. And it scares us. The surface appearance of things swings open to reveal life's ultimate depth. We become unhinged by a love so amazing it cannot be contained in a dwelling. We cannot render it safe as we would nuclear fuel in steel cylinders welded closed. Instead it sparks a song in our hearts. "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

This change doesn't just happen. We have to wait for it. We have to be ready to see God's love when it comes. And finally we must be ready to respond. Some come to church and it all does not happen for them right away. Rather than wait, they conclude this must not be the right place for them and they search out somewhere else. Some churches in an effort to insure a powerful experience leave one almost breathless in relentless activity. There is no room to wait and reflect.

Our world is increasingly one of "conflicting visions, intense emotions, and unpredictable events." The opportunity to find quiet space, to see deeply, to find a new and caring way fades as the pace of life increases and daily activity becomes ever more frenetic. We allow social media to grasp us so tightly that, strangely enough, we become socially isolated. "Our heroes fade into mere personality." We are bereft of places to just be, to just be human, to just be loved, to just be forgiven, to just not be afraid. Like Joshua and Peter,

James, and John we need to find a mountain where we can just wait. I think it is not an accident that Saint Paul's is built at the summit of Chestnut Hill.

Our second Rector became Bishop to the Great Sioux Nation in 1873. He reflected somewhat wistfully about the native youth he encountered in the Dakotas who before the age of sixteen or seventeen would seclude themselves and fast until they got "a keener sense of the invisible." He noted that this was not part of his own upbringing. He admired the mysticism of what we would call a vision quest today. Is that not what Moses undertook with Joshua, or Jesus with Peter, James, and John? The first step toward life-changing love is to wait for it.

The Lord instructs Moses to wait. Moses tells the elders to wait. On Mount Sinai Moses and Joshua wait for six days while the cloud of God's glory covered the mountain. Finally, on the seventh day, that is, on the Sabbath, God spoke. To wait upon the Lord has a rich meaning in our Christian tradition. After six days, that is, on the Sabbath as well, God spoke to Peter, James, and John. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Sabbath is the time when we set aside our preoccupations and busyness, our expectations, the conflicting visions of our time, and the cult of personality. The idea of Sabbath is captured in our Prayer Book Collect for Saturdays. It asks that we may put away all earthly anxieties so that the ensuing rest might prepare us for service. Our Sabbath might be a Saturday off. It might be Sunday worship where as one parishioner said, "Life slows down for an hour." It is a quiet moment during the week, a walk around the block. Whatever that space apart from anxiety is for you, we all need time to wait upon the Lord.

Then no longer blinded by worries or deafened by demands we can see and we can hear. Second Peter says that we like the apostles might become eyewitnesses of God's majesty. They saw the risen Christ in glory. We see the Savior's love in one who shows mercy to another. They saw Jesus' face shining like the sun. We see the colors of an early morning sunrise reminding us that there is beauty in the world. They heard that Jesus is the Beloved. We hear that we too share in that same divine love. Our Bishop joined us for a reception last Wednesday. In a gentle way he asked if we had ever met Jesus in

our lives. We begin Vestry meetings by asking if there has been an instance in the last month of your being drawn nearer to Christ, or of your helping another to draw nearer? The stories in response come from daily life, encounters with others, insights, children, natural beauty. Yogi Berra once said that you can observe a lot by watching. We might even observe the presence of Christ – in healing, in loving, in beauty, in life.

So what do we do? How do we live into this vision of glory around us, to this love of God made manifest? One thing we don't do is try to keep it for ourselves. It can't be contained. It moves among us. But it changes us. The consuming fire on the mountaintop that Joshua saw prepared him for the next step in his life. He would lead Israel into the promised land. The dazzling white clothes and unworldly, radiant face of Jesus-transfigured, prepared Peter, James, and John for the next step in their lives – to take the message of the crucified and risen Christ into the world. Second Peter understands these images as a prefigurement of the second coming. This is the end-time image of the morning star rising in people's hearts. On that day we will sing together, be a complete ensemble, a beloved community. We become more loved in order to better love. We hear the still, small voice of God in order to be better listeners. We see the divine fire in order to feel the passion in our own lives. We see the radiant face of Jesus in order to better see Jesus in others' faces. This is how we respond when we create the space to wait and become aware of the divine showing up and speaking to our hearts.

The Christian life is one of being changed often slowly, sometimes with suddenness as though the universe has just tilted and we see everything with fresh eyes, "charged with the grandeur of God," in the words of the poet. Jesus' transfiguration leads to *our* being transformed continually into Christ's likeness. Paul tells the Corinthians: "All of us... seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another..." (2Cor. 3: 18). That is why in our prayer this morning (that we call the collect) we can ask that we "be changed into Jesus' likeness from glory to glory..." The natural state of any Christian is change. We have to wait for God who it seems to us may be late in coming, but then to our surprise is always right on time. We have to possess eyes to see and ears to

hear. We discover God in the moment to dazzle, to quietly affirm, to love and lift us up. Then, we are prepared to take our life's next step.

Amen.