

Text Matthew 17: 1-9
"Transitions"
February 26, 2017
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"Transition"- the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another. As I spent this last week in Baltimore with my mom I was reminded of a phrase that my mother used to tell me growing up. It seemed as a young kid we were constantly moving. We were always in transition as my parents established themselves in Baltimore and we moved from home to home. I think I counted at one time that through my grade school years we lived in 5 or 6 different houses, which seemed a lot compared to my friends around me. It sometimes felt like we were always in transition. And my mother would always remind me that as long as we had each other and our "stuff" we carried with us our memories. It wasn't the house or the property, the "dwellings" but it was the memories which we carried with us that made each house a home. This is no more evident than in the shadow box that has lived and moved with us since I was an infant. In that box holds my great grandfather's tie, my grandfather's seamen's passport, my dad's birth announcement, a pipe, a pair of gloves, buttons and coins from family members long passed. They lived through world wars and depression, Jim Crow and Civil Rights. These were people for whom transition was a part of life as planting season turned to growing season turned to harvest season while the world around them changed.

When we started looking at scriptures for this Sunday, this Sunday when I transition out of my role as Woodland's Associate Minister, it seemed quite appropriate that the lectionary text and the liturgical point in which we find ourselves is a point of transition. We are at the ending of the season of Epiphany, the season of light that begins with the baptism of Jesus and to voice of God declaring to the people that "this is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And we are moving into the season of Lent, where we spiritually prepare to move from Jesus' public ministry to the Cross. We are also at a point of transition in Jesus' public ministry as he begins to focus more on the imminent suffering and resurrection that is about to take place, and makes his move physically and theologically toward Jerusalem.

How appropriate that we are here, on the mountaintop moving down to the valley below, at this transition point in scripture, when it seems that we find ourselves in transition in so many ways. In the immediate, the life of this church is in transition as I move out of my role and the church finds itself thinking about the future. We are still living into a new structure, we have new opportunities for ministry, new challenges to face.

My personal life feels in transition. I have served this church for the last 3 and a half years through residency, into my professional life as a chaplain and as I began my full time ministry at the University of Kentucky as their Palliative Care Chaplain. This church has been my dwelling place, my constant through these years of change.

I know as I look out on you that many of you find yourselves in transition whether it is planning for and making the big leap from high school to college or moving from working into retirement; transition in your role as child and becoming caregiver or as parent and becoming more dependent on care. Or those smaller yet just as important transitions like moving to a new house or new job.

And then we are all in this time of transition as our country changes leadership and focus and as we see policy shifts seemingly each and every day. How appropriate that we are here. On transfiguration Sunday, facing change and transition whether good or bad... and unless you are

a “change junkie” like my mother, these changes can bring with them some anxiety around the newness that lies ahead.

So, what is it that scripture can tell us today? For those of you that have been in the church for some time you probably don't need me to tell you the story again. As my minister back home told me this week that in 30 years of ministry there are only so many ways you can talk about going back down the mountain. But for those of us who might need a refresher, let's do a recap.

First thing to know is that this account of Jesus' transfiguration on a mountaintop occurs in all three synoptic gospels. Each of them places important weight on this scripture as a turning point in Jesus' ministry and identity. In all three gospels Jesus goes to the mountaintop with Peter, James and John “by themselves.” Once atop the mountain these three disciples are witness to one of the great mysteries and magnanimous moments in the life of Jesus as he is transfigured before them; his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming dazzling white- whiter than any bleach could bleach. And suddenly Christ in all his glory is joined by Moses and Elijah and Peter offers to build three dwellings so they may stay there a top the mountain. But there are other plans as God's voice comes down, “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased; LISTEN TO HIM.”

As we know from the last several Sundays of hearing about Matthew's particular take on the Sermon on the Mount we know that the gospel of Matthew has a lens and an agenda as the writer passes on the story of Christ, conveying the deity and the mystery. Matthew was speaking to a largely Jewish audience after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The people that Matthew was speaking to were under imperial Roman rule and often found themselves persecuted for their faith and afraid for the future. All that was known, all that had been, was seemingly destroyed with the Temple. And so it makes sense that Matthew makes one small change to Mark's account of the transfiguration. Only in Matthew do we hear Jesus say, “Get up, and do not be afraid.”

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While Peter and the disciples are prepared to build dwelling places to keep the awesomeness of the moment stagnant, permanent, Jesus is urging another way. One author wrote that the disciples saw permanence in the midst of change- which would have been a common response at the time when the practice was to build altars and temples at the site of holy acts. It was and is normal to want to bottle up those moments- to stay on the mountaintop, as it were. But Jesus turns normal on its head and offers a counter cultural way.

Pope Francis described it this way: "To put it simply: The Holy Spirit bothers us. Because he moves us, he makes us walk, he pushes the Church to go forward. And we are like Peter at the Transfiguration: 'Ah, how wonderful it is to be here like this, all together!'...But don't bother us. We want the Holy Spirit to doze off...we want to domesticate the Holy Spirit. And that's no good. because he is God, he is that wind which comes and goes and you don't know where. He is the power of God, he is the one who gives us consolation and strength to move forward. But: to move forward! And this bothers us. It's so much nicer to be comfortable."

One of my greatest memories during these last few years at Woodland was the mission trip that we took to New York City two years ago- Brian and my first honeymoon as we like to call it! While travelling with seven youth through the big city is not what I would call “easy” it was a life changing experience for many of our youth and for me as well. We served with organizations

that predominantly served the homeless population of New York. Our kids worked so hard and only rarely complained when we made them walk 5-10 miles a day to complete our work and have some fun time... let me tell you though- they slept well! But what was so amazing was not what happened on the trip, but what happened when we got back home. When we came down off the mountaintop experience every single kid told me, "I want to do more service." "I want to find ways to do this here." And so we started serving regularly at the Catholic Action Center, we committed to helping physically and financially when the Senga family joined this community, and we found ways to serve others through small acts in our regular meetings. I have to believe that that trip encouraged our kids to move forward out of what was and is comfortable. That is what the Holy Spirit pushes us to do. "Get up, and do not be afraid."

You know, my job, my ministry at UK is to help people through times of transition. That is a large part of what palliative care is. Helping those who are going through a serious illness or a terminal illness get through the transitions, whether that means adjusting to a new diagnosis and treatment course or helping a family say goodbye as their loved one transitions from this world into the next. With that being said, I do not like change. I like tradition. I get anxious in times of transition. And so in preparation for today I've been doing what I encourage my patients to do so often! I have been reflecting on my memories with you all and our time together and I've been thinking about what gives me hope.

Woodland, you are a quirky, loving little beloved community. You in so many ways point to the Kingdom of God just by being you. In the eight years that I have come to know you and love you, I have seen you be a place of radical hospitality, even when it makes some uncomfortable. I have seen you practice agape love for neighbor and for other. I have seen you seek to further Christ's kingdom through service and commitment to justice. And it would be so easy to build that dwelling place right where we are. To say, we're doing all the right things and we just need to keep safe here, doing what we're doing. But the gospel urges us away from these thoughts.

Feasting on the Word author, Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz writes, "The moment of transfiguration is that point at which God says to the world and to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or sorrow. We cannot build God a monument, and we cannot keep God safe. We also cannot escape the light that God will shed on our path. We cannot escape God, Immanuel among us. God will find us in our homes and in our workplaces. God will find us when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy. God will find us when we run away from God and when we are sitting in the middle of what seems like hell. So 'get up and do not be afraid.'"

It has been an honor to serve you and to become part of this family. Today marks an official transition and "goodbye for now." But I have such hope and such excitement to see the ways in which God continues to find this community as you move forward. Thanks for letting me be a part of your journey for a little while.