

Sermon (Matthew 17: 1-9, 2/26/17):

In a German class I took in College, we read, in German, several classic books by German authors.

One of them was Bertolt Brecht's three penny opera about a well-organized, strictly controlled group of beggars working the streets of London.

Admittedly, as we read, we tended to pay more attention to the language than the book's content-studying syntax and new vocabulary words and how the author designed sentences. The story almost became secondary but, even so, it's a story that has stayed with me.

Another book we read was one by Franz Kafka – the Metamorphosis. A very strange book. In fact, between this and Brecht's book, I began to wonder if all German authors were a little weird.

Metamorphosis tells the story about a guy who is a salesman stuck in a miserable job and working for a hard-hearted boss. One morning the salesman wakes up to discover that, overnight, he had been transformed into a bug. Yes, an ugly insect with lots of legs, a hard shell on his back, and all the other creepy details we think of when it comes to bugs.

Kafka offers no explanation as to why this man underwent this nasty transformation. The book just opens describing, almost matter of factly, how the salesman begins to realize that he is no longer a man but a bug. The remainder of the story mostly focuses on the reaction that others have to his radical and strange transformation. As you can imagine, it's not good.

His father is horrified, even to the point of physically abusing his son. The mother is torn by her maternal instincts that draw her to him and the revulsion she feels when seeing him. The sister is about the only one who shows the man any kindness – bringing him food that a bug would eat and removing furniture from his room so he has space to move around in his new bulky body.

One of the interesting things about this story is that no one ever seemed the least bit interested in the 'why' of this transformation. Why did it happen? How did happen? Could it be reversed? Is it contagious?

The entire time I was wading through this story-looking up

vocabulary words, trying to figure out its grammar- these were the questions that kept creeping into my thoughts, hoping someone in the story would ask them.

Well, thankfully, Jesus didn't turn into a bug. Thankfully Kafka's influence came nowhere near this moment that has come to be known in the life of the church as Jesus' transfiguration. Even so, it is a moment in Jesus' life that strikes one as odd and, maybe, even out of place. It is a moment that raises far more questions than answers.

On a mountain that Jesus hikes up, taking with him three of his buddies, Peter, James, and John, Jesus undergoes a miraculous and strange metamorphosis. So overwhelmed are his companions by it that they are left dumbfounded. The question that hovers over the whole scene is 'why?' What was this moment's purpose? Why did it happen? What was it supposed to reveal? Why did Jesus choose this moment in time to do this out of character sort of thing? All good questions.

Perhaps there are some hints to be found in what was going on just prior to this. First, in a rare moment of brilliance, we witness Peter shine. After Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is, Peter immediately pipes up declaring, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.' Jesus spins around on his heels, embraces Peter with joy, and declares that it's this kind of faith upon which his church would be built.

Things quickly go downhill from there, however. First Jesus tells them about the suffering and death he will find in Jerusalem. Peter rebels, probably as any of us would have, saying, 'Well then we just won't go to Jerusalem. You mustn't allow this to happen, Jesus.' Jesus rebukes Peter in extremely harsh tones. 'Get behind me, Satan!' He tells Peter. 'You are a stumbling block...' We can only begin to imagine how much that must have stung.

Following that, Jesus then tells his followers that they too will be called upon to make great sacrifices for their faith. 'Be prepared,' Jesus tells them, 'to take up your own cross and follow.'

Heavy stuff. Between the bad news of Jesus' prediction of what would happen in Jerusalem, the painful rebuke Peter suffered for loving Jesus too much, and the surprising news that the destiny of this journey

would not be power and privilege for Jesus' followers but their own cross, my guess is that their morale had hit rock bottom. This is not what they had hoped for when they had dropped everything on the shores of Galilee.

So, maybe, this explains why Jesus chose this moment for a mountaintop rejuvenation, an attitude readjustment retreat, a 'big picture' glimpse of what God was up to! Maybe this is what they needed most.

I must confess that I think I get what those disciples must have been feeling. I, like they and maybe you, remember how it felt when first responding to Christ's call to follow. Optimism and possibility overflowed like a wine glass being asked to hold more than it could possibly contain. So many ideas, so many things I wanted to try, so much I had learned that I was aching to share, so much possibility. I thought people would come running. This is Jesus after all – the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the one whose living water promises to assuage all thirst! I knew it would be hard, I knew there would be bumps and bruises, but, all in all, this fresh new state of belief had me convinced that, even with all its faults and blemishes, the church remained the world's best hope.

I still think that but not in the same way anymore. The 'wins' are often hard to come by. The excitement is not as contagious as I thought it would be. The challenge of provoking interest in and commitment to this Christ is quite enormous. The world is a frightening mess despite our best efforts to evoke change. If anything, there are too many moments these days when the world's brokenness seems as keen as it has ever been. The challenge of being hope in a sad world is a most monumental one. The needfulness of cross carrying feels more than a little overwhelming.

No, I'm not trying to depress you. I'm not saying this because I figure that if I'm down I mine as well take all of you with me. I'm saying this because I'm guessing I'm not the only feeling these things. Perhaps, you've been doing your best to put forth that stiff upper lip, look on the bright side, the sun will come out tomorrow demeaner but, inside, maybe your gut is churning with doubt and despair like mine often is. Perhaps, you too are more than a bit frightened by the mess that keeps coming at us through daily news reports.

Over the years, when I have preached on the transfiguration story, I usually focus on what Jesus did *after* this mountain top experience. I usually talk about how Jesus told his disciples to get up and head back down the mountain with him. I usually point out how he took them by the hand and jumped right back into the redemption game again. I usually talk about how mountaintop experiences are wonderful but the real reason behind them is for us to get back to work in the valley, just like Jesus, Peter, James and John did.

This time, however, I think what I need more of right now is the mountaintop and maybe this is what Jesus' followers were feeling. Maybe they were so down they just needed something they could cling to in the mess. Some treasured reminder that God was still in control, God's story of redemption had not hit a dead end. Perhaps they needed something that would shake them up a little, get the blood flowing, energize them for what is and what's to come. Maybe what they needed, what I need, what we need is a mountaintop shake-up, reminding us that this wild ride the Holy Spirit is taking us on, is still a work in process.

I guess one of the risks with this is that, as the old saying, be careful what you ask for, you just might get it. And if there is a possibility that God might give us what we're asking for, perhaps it would be good to prepare ourselves for it but what should we expect? What should we be on the lookout for?

Well, at least from this story, it's a little hard to say because I think words, as they often do, failed the one who tried to put this experience into words. We know this was a significant moment in the lives of the disciples but why it was significant is hard to quantify. To be sure, they tried to explain it using the best they had at the time...faces that shined like the sun, clothes that dazzled white, Elijah and Moses appearing out of nowhere for a little chat with Jesus. Peter, so lost for a response, babbling on about building tents for Elijah, Moses, and Jesus, as if they really needed them. Then the skies open and a voice like thunder announces, 'This is my Son, I am pleased with him...listen to what he tells you!'

What we do know is that it all proved too much for the disciples. Their knees buckled from underneath them and they fell to the ground

shaking like leaves. They were scared for their lives. What follows, however, is a small but interesting detail that only Matthew includes. After all this razzle-dazzle, knee buckling, adrenaline provoking fear, Jesus then gently touches the disciples' shoulders. Slowly they uncover their eyes and look up. The fearsome display of God's glory is gone leaving only Jesus standing there, telling them to not be afraid. I wonder. Might this tender moment define this mountain top experience as much anything else?

'Don't be afraid.' I'm thinking those words were not just about what they had seen on that mountain but about everything up to this point- Jerusalem, Jesus' predicting his suffering and death, the command to pick up their own cross. 'Don't be afraid.'

Mountaintop experiences are great and, yes, every now and again they do happen and it's a real rush. They kind of overwhelm you and, while it's difficult to explain, you just get this feeling, this knowing that you are in the presence of Glory.

All well and good but, I wonder, if we are also being reminded by Matthew that this is not the only way this bigger than life God of ours comes to us to encourage us and restore us. Sometimes maybe it's a touch on the shoulder. Sometimes maybe it's as simple as human touch. Sometimes maybe it's as powerful as a whisper telling us to not be afraid. Sometimes maybe it's a very mortal voice reminding us that we're still alive, we're still God's beloved, we're still protected by a love that will not let us go.

Yes, that's what I think I need, maybe what we all need in these most dangerous of times and most worrisome of days. A reminder, a touch, a reassurance that fear need not and should not be our dictator.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, walk with us, we pray. Walk with us in the days ahead recognizing those times when we need to be lifted up because life's trials and worries have gotten the best of us. Walk with us and lead us to places that restore our perspective of where we are going and what we are called to do in your name. Show us, in our times of defeat, that you are still with us, you are still reliable, and your redeeming purposes for us and your creation remain steadfast and unchanged. Surprise us, even shake us up when our bodies have grown weary and our thoughts muddled. Reach out and touch our shoulders when fear has so infiltrated our thinking and feeling that we cannot see beyond it. Walk with us, O God, and transform us into the people you know we can be. Restore your church so that it might be reinvigorated with renewed determination. Surround us with your mystery, open our ears to the sound of your voice, and renew us with the vigor of your unleashed glory.

We pray this, O God, as many concerns weigh upon us.

Concerns for loved ones and for our human family. Concerns for leaders and those in power in our nation and nations around the world. Concerns for the little ones, the vulnerable ones caught in the deadly volley of war and threats of war. Concerns for those who are victimized by intolerance, racism, prejudice, anger, and hate. Concerns for those who are weak, frail, ill, and dying. In the sure and certain hope of your reassuring touch, we also pray that you will hear these prayers we now name in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.