Sermon for The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, March 3, 2019
Title: Coming down

There are precious few passages from scripture that we hear more than once in the three-year cycle of Biblical texts appointed for our worship. When you think about it, this makes a lot of sense: after all, a primary reason for following a lectionary at all is to ensure we hear from as much of the Bible as possible, and even with that explicit goal in mind if the only time you regularly encounter scripture is on Sunday morning you are still going to hear but a tiny fraction of it triennially. So for a passage to show up more than once in that three-year cycle, it must be pretty important. Certain texts, like the passion accounts, we even hear every year during Holy Week. And others, like the narratives for Jesus’ birth or the coming of the Holy Spirit, we hear again and again around Christmas and Pentecost.

But there is only one story that shows up, never fail, not once but twice each turn around the sun (that’s six times in the three year cycle!) and that is today’s Gospel: The Transfiguration. We hear it today, on the cusp of Lent, and then again in August in observation of the actual Feast of the Transfiguration. The question is: why? Why this story? Why at these points in the Church year? After all, as far as Gospel passages go, it’s an odd one - particularly obtuse and embarrassing for us post-enlightenment, scientific-method types. We’re cool with Jesus the radical prophet, Jesus the reformer, Jesus who companions us in the dark night of the soul. We can even stretch to embrace Jesus the healer, the miracle worker, the exorciser of darkness – provided our analysis makes adequate room for metaphor and psychological nuance. But Jesus glowing brightly on a mountain top? Jesus getting chummy with the ancestors? Jesus the celestial night-light, shining for all to see? It’s a bit much.

As I’ve pondered the wisdom of the Church in confronting us over (and over and over) again with this story, I can’t help but wonder if this isn’t about getting a different perspective. About helping us to see not only Jesus anew, but the world around us anew, at critical moments in the Church year. In organizational leadership, there is a concept known as “getting on the balcony.” Imagine this. You somehow stumble into a great ballroom, a la Downton Abbey or The Crown, and find yourself immersed in a highly choreographed dance. Everyone seems to know their part as they glide effortlessly across the floor. And they are friendly, these figments of your
imagination! So right away one of them whisks you into the fray, teaching you, guiding you, correcting your steps. And soon you are as caught up in the action as if immersed in a flash mob. It’s thrilling, exhilarating, delightful! And that might be just fine if all you want is to take part. But if you’re actually there to help move this group in one direction or another, perhaps to better utilize the space, get more turns with different partners, increase meaningful interactions, or – gasp – even teach them a new dance entirely, then staying on the floor won’t do. You’ll learn the steps but you’ll miss the mark.

So eventually you sneak up to the balcony, goblet in hand, and peer over the railing, and at first it just looks like the now-familiar routine from another vantage point. But then you notice some unusual things. For some reason – intentional? unintentional? – everyone seems to be avoiding one whole quarter of the room. The spirals twirl and twirl, but approaching the southeast, irregularly, and everyone somehow knows to compensate. And while the dance dictates an unbiased switching of partners, you notice that some people never seem to join up. Even more oddly, there’s one person everyone seems to be avoiding entirely. And then there are those who you didn’t notice at all before, those not dancing but serving the sherry and the Pellegrino; the red-eyed boy wiping the floor after those having a bit too much fun; the cooks in the kitchen and butlers in the hall.

When you make your way back into the dance and ask people directly about these things, they are entirely unaware of them. Avoiding that corner? Of course we aren’t! Doing our best to stay away from Billy? Hardly. It would be definitively discouraging - that is, if you expected people to act rationally. But we are not rational beings, not really, and why we do what we do is often a mystery to us. So if we intend to grow, change, shift course, spiritually as in any other way - which is, of course, the focus on the season of repentance and reconciliation before us – then getting up on the balcony is a great idea. It’s not about getting away so much as seeing things, ourselves included, differently.

Today, Jesus goes up to – well, not the balcony, but to the mountaintop. Jesus gets above the fray, finds a high place apart, and, importantly, he takes his three closest companions with him: Peter, John, and James. Jesus has been trying to lead his friends and followers in a new direction, but he realizes he will not - maybe cannot? - do this alone. He needs his disciples to see things as he sees them; to notice what had previously escaped them. Now we may think of mountains as the site of triumphant hikes and beautiful sunsets, but throughout the Hebrew
Scriptures the mountain was always a holy place: a place of communion with the Most High. Going up the mountain was always a fearsome and fearful thing, not because you didn’t know what you’d find there but precisely because you did. This is where you met the one who said disarming, alarming things like, “Go!” or “Sell all your possessions” or “Follow me.” Things that might make us, like they did those who came before, stammer, “So, yea, God, thanks but no thanks?” as we stumble backwards, hoping to tumble into our old lives, unnerved to slowly realize there is no going back to normal.

So Jesus goes up, his friends shaking in their boots as they tremble behind him, and what does he do? He prays. (Prayer is an excellent way to get on the balcony, whether you’re on a mountaintop or your living room couch.) Only while Jesus is praying, something happens. His form changes, his clothes glow white, and it is as if the veil between worlds is torn in two and suddenly Peter, John and James see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, the quintessential priest and prophet. Not only that, but they seem to be in on this terrible thing Jesus has been talking about lately: that great and gruesome reality about to unfold in Jerusalem. Peter suggests ever so unhelpfully that they could build three tents, or booths, for them, before a cloud comes over them and, in the Greek, en-tents them instead and a voice proclaims, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

It is a strange scene, for sure. The disciples glimpsing another level of reality; the natural world conspiring to draw them closer to God; and all the while it remains unclear that they have any idea what to make of this. But isn’t that how our encounters with God often go? We don’t usually recognize them when they first come into our lives. They overwhelm, alarm, confuse, disorient. They feel more like dying than rising, and they usually scare the crud out of us. It’s only later we can look back and point to them, shakily, saying, “there. I don’t know what it was, but I know it started then.” So even if they didn’t really know what to make of this experience, the disciples come down off that mountain with a new perspective: Jesus is God’s son, God’s chosen.

Now hearing this story just days before Ash Wednesday, we might remember that we - like Peter, James, and John - are about to walk that final mile with Jesus: to witness his excruciating vulnerability, his betrayal by his closest friends, his scapegoating at the hands of a corrupt empire, his shame on the cross, and ultimately his death and resurrection. And it might be tempting in the weeks ahead, which consistently contrast Jesus’ perfect humanity with the
brokenness of the individuals and systems around him, to forget that this is God’s Son, God’s chosen, who has willingly come down off that mountain to share in this life with us. And if we miss that – if we become so caught up in the dance, in the drama, that we forget who Jesus really is – it will be hard for us to remember in our own dances and dramas that God keeps coming into the world, keeps willingly humbling Godself, to join us, and to notice all the ways in which we keep ignoring, misunderstanding, betraying, and crucifying Christ in our midst.

Part of the traditional piety of our faith focuses on how good and great God was in the generous self-giving of the life of Jesus. The story has often been told like this. There God was, enthroned in glory, untouched by the muck and mire that stains human life, when God noticed our plight and took pity on us, deigning to enter the world, to intervene in the life of Jesus, and save us from ourselves. God could have just stayed comfy cozy on the mountaintop, but instead he – and in this telling you better bet God’s a he (a grumpy he) – he condescends to join us. But what the Transfiguration reminds us of is that it is in the very nature of God to come off the mountain, to walk with us, to save us. God simply would not be the God of Moses and Elijah, the parent of Jesus, if God were the least bit inclined to stay far removed and untouched by our sorrows, our sufferings, and our surprising joy.

I’ve been in Pakistan for most of the last few weeks – an incredibly beautiful, incredibly troubled country, and one marred by crushing poverty. On one of our final days there, as we drove across the canal that cuts through the center of the city of Faisalabad, I noticed a gaggle of boys gathered by the edge of the water. Now the canal is one of the precious few reminders of the natural world in that place, but its waters flow like sludge and smell like the sewers dump into it, which they probably do. From our perch at the edge of a bridge, it looked like there was trouble. One of the youth – nine or ten? – was hastily tearing off his shirt as others huddled on the bank. And for a moment some maternal instinct welled up within as I tried to assess the situation, and not quite in words I thought all at once: someone has fallen in the water. People here don’t know how to swim. Awww, man, I’m going to catch some disgusting disease jumping into the canal to get him.

Thankfully, before the thought had fully formed, I realized I had misread the scene. The boys were just roughhousing on the shore on a lazy afternoon. No one had fallen in. But I lingered with that thought a moment. If someone had fallen in and my van stopped nearby, I’m sure I would have very willingly hopped into those muddy waters, not because I’m so heroic but
because on balance – the life of a child for my squeamishness – the choice would be so obvious. Yes, God chose to come down off the mountain in the life of Jesus, to love us and enliven us and show us that another life, another dance, is possible. And it meant being immersed in the muck and mire and mess of human life, so undignified, so utterly wonderful. But I doubt the thought of staying above the fray really occurred to God. On balance – fullness of life for all God’s children, all God’s chosen, hanging in the balance – the choice would be obvious.

As I’ve settled home and started catching up on all the happenings of the last two weeks, not only here at Christ Church but across the country and around the world, I can’t help but think that this story – the story of God’s own self willing to take on human flesh and form and feeling, to dwell with us and know us and love us and free us – continues to be the most relevant headline of all. What if we really believe that Jesus walks with us in this time of political division and upheaval, when a significant portion of the country sees immigration across our southern border as a national emergency, and another significant portion sees the national emergencies of inadequate health care, rising hate crime, the opiod epidemic, and rampant gun violence as far more urgently threatening to their fellow citizens and themselves? And a significant portion of all those groups can’t understand why it is so hard for us to listen to and learn from one another? Are we confident Jesus would willingly come down to join us in this mess? To encourage us, maybe, but perhaps also to turn our hearts, or distress us with more nuanced perspectives? Was it not his distressing tendency to make us so uncomfortable, to disrupt our self-righteous indignation, that got him killed those many years ago?

The wider Church is also in its own time of division and dis-ease. At their national conference last week, the United Methodist Church voted not to fully welcome and celebrate the ministry of those identifying as LGBTQ+. And lest we Episcopalians in the super-progressive Diocese of California, who have indeed been on the forefront of this issue for decades, are tempted to feel smug about how much further we’ve come, let’s not forget that it was only last summer at our General Convention that full inclusion became the law of the land for us. And as the Archbishop of Canterbury’s announcement just a few days ago that he is not inviting the same-sex partners of LGBTQ+ Bishops to attend Lambeth Conference reminds us, the global Anglican Communion, of which we are a part, has so much more work to do.

Which is why the Transfiguration is so important - why we need to hear this story not simply on the cusp of Lent but today, here and now, in our lives and our world. Because Peter,
James and John – they were so scared by what they saw around them, so afraid of their circumstances, that they were inclined to stay quiet about the good news revealed to them. But Jesus just would not stay put. Jesus came down off that mountain, willingly entering into our complicated, messy conversations; undaunted by our prejudices and contradictions, our worries and our weariness. Jesus came down off that mountain to willingly enter our national divides, our moral crises, our identity politics, even our personal sludge - our depression and addiction, our grief and our anger, our sadness and our fear; not only to be with us but to move us in a new direction: to turn our hearts, change our lives, and transform the world. Jesus came down off that mountain and got to work, as only God’s son, God’s chosen could, and, thanks be to God, though the road is long and the way is harsh, he never stopped, and, together, we will see his mission through. Amen.