

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 19, 2023 (Transfiguration of Our Lord, Year A)
Matthew 17:1-9
2 Peter 1:16-21

I've just started to notice something over the last couple weeks – the sun. Lately, there's more light when I wake up, and there's still light when I go home. It's wonderful. I've missed it.

A man named Rudd described what it's like to live at the North Pole. At the North Pole they don't have days like OUR days. They have DARKNESS for THREE months. For THREE MONTHS you never see the sun! I can't imagine. He said, "I ached and hungered to see the dawn." Then, one morning in February, he climbed to the top of a wind-swept ridge and sat quietly, facing east. The sky was a gray sheet. Then it became a pale blue that gradually deepened. Then there was a rush of color—as the SUN ROSE. Rudd stood there blinking with frozen tears on his cheeks. It took some time for his eyes to get USED to the light, but once they had, he found that it was wonderful and beautiful up there. After being in the darkness for so long, he enjoyed the sunshine, and soaked it into his weary and aching bones. It was a wonderful place to be. And no doubt, if we could have asked Rudd at that moment, he would have said, "Lord, it is good to be here."

I imagine that experience was something like the Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter, James and John out of the darkness of this WORLD to a SPECIAL place, a mountaintop, where he was transformed right before their awe-stuck eyes. Radiant in his divine glory, Jesus' shone in majesty and splendor like the sun, but THIS was the SON OF GOD. As Peter SAID, "Lord, it is good to be here."

But then, Peter, as he so OFTEN does, goes and says the WRONG thing. "Jesus, if you want I'll build you some huts." What an ODD thing to say, but then, what are you SUPPOSED to say when your friend is glowing like an arc lamp?

Peter wasn't sure HOW to respond. The saying goes, "Don't just sit there, do something!" And Peter's INITIAL reaction was EXACTLY THAT – he had to DO something, ANYTHING. He was confused by the mysterious glory of what was happening, so he tried to back away from it, resorting to the comfort of something he KNEW, something USEFUL — BUSY work. He could BUILD something. If he couldn't UNDERSTAND the event, at least he could try to PRESERVE it, or even CONTAIN it.

Peter ALWAYS says the WRONG thing. But let's not be too HARD on Peter, because his response is a mirror of most of US, how WE respond to God moments.

We've all had "a mountaintop experience" a time when God seemed really close. It may have been on an actual mountain. It may have been by a seaside, or a lake, or in the woods. It may have been a special MOMENT with a loved one. Or an emotional or thrilling moment. It may have EVEN happened in a worship service.

But faced with a mountaintop, something wonderful, something truly AWE-some, we SO often FAIL to give it TIME, the time it DESERVES. We back away, going back to the COMFORT of something we KNOW, BUSYING ourselves with NORMAL activities.

In his book, *This Sunrise of Wonder*, Michael Mayne writes this to his grandchildren: "If I could have waved a fairy grandfather's wand at your birth and wished upon you just one gift it would not have been beauty or riches or a long life: It would have been the gift of WONDER." He goes on to suggest that they set their sights not on success, but on reverence. They should live with a sense of awe.

Maybe that's part of what's going ON at the Mount of Transfiguration. In this GLIMPSE of glory, Jesus is trying to give the disciples the gift of WONDER, a SENSE of AWE.

Every sermon I've ever heard on the Transfiguration jumps to the END of the story. Preachers say that we can't just STAY on the mountain; Jesus leads us back DOWN to the plains and the valleys to do the work of MINISTRY, REFRESHED by the vision of his glory. And they're RIGHT of course.

But isn't there ALSO time to TAKE IN his glory FIRST?

BEFORE we go back to work, notice that something ELSE happens on that mountain. Notice how GOD RESPONDS to Peter.

Peter says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. What do you want me to do? I know. I could...".

And it SAYS, "WHILE he was STILL speaking," God SWOOPS in in a BRIGHT cloud. "WHILE he was STILL speaking," GOD INTERRUPTS Peter! God STOPS him.

God says, "Peter, STOP... LOOK at my Son... Just STOP... Stop and LISTEN."

We don't have enough SILENCE in our lives anymore. It makes us uncomfortable. It's awkward. We try to fill it with anything we can. And it's a shame, because so often God is IN the silence.

Have you even been to an event where they observed a MOMENT of silence in honor of someone or in recognition of some tragic event? It often lasts a full minute, and it's ALWAYS profound and humbling.

Some years ago, I hosted a gathering of pastors from my conference in North Dakota. We always finished our meetings by worshiping together, and that month I led them in a service of healing. We took some time to reflect in silence, because God meets us in the silence. Now we tend to think of pastors as having it all together and having their whole prayer life perfected, but as these 15 pastors sat silently in the pews, a profound thing happened — they were overcome. There were tears. They were OVERWHELMED by the SILENCE, by being in God's PRESENCE.

Everybody, even pastors, need to take the time to STOP...and look at Jesus in his glory...just STOP...and listen. I'm struck by what Peter wrote as he talked about what he saw on the mountain that day. He said, "You will do well to be ATTENTIVE to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

Be ATTENTIVE to this. There are places in our hearts that we KEEP in the dark. We keep them hidden, behind locked doors. Nobody else may know those places even EXIST, but GOD knows. And Jesus wants to fill even THOSE places with his light.

There's a folk tale about a man who offers to leave his cottage to whichever of his sons can FILL it COMPLETELY with any ONE thing. The eldest son brings a wagon load of sand. The next son, a load of sawdust. Neither reaches the ceiling. But his third son succeeds—with a lantern. With his lantern he FILLS the cottage from floor to ceiling with LIGHT.

"Be ATTENTIVE to this, as to a LAMP shining in a dark place," Peter says. What are you keeping from God? If a candle can light an entire room, imagine what "the day DAWNING and the morning star RISING in your HEART" can do. All Jesus asks is that you open the door.

You see, the Transfiguration wasn't only for Jesus; it was for US. His majesty is meant to transfigure US TOO, to transform our hearts, to CHANGE us, to FILL us with his light.

What we SEE ISN'T all there is. When you laugh, when you cry, when you feel something happening inside your heart, open yourself to it. Open yourself to the possibilities. Open your ears, and listen. Be ATTENTIVE to this. And let God's power sink in – let his light shine.

LISTEN in the silence.

(Take a moment of silence.)

Now that you're LISTENING, THIS is when you can HEAR Jesus, when he TOUCHES you and says, "Do not be afraid." Amen.