

Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 17:1-9 and Baptism

Feb. 19,2023

Lord God how might we be a lamp shining in a dark place?

Today is a good day. Our readings tell us of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top. An amazing story
A visual bonanza...a stunning revelation of transformation and immortal glory

Jesus has headed up the mountain with three named companions:

Peter James and John. And there Jesus is transformed right in front of them: his face and clothes shining white like the sun. Suddenly Elijah and Moses appear out of thin air and Jesus begins to converse with them.

Then Peter said to Jesus: *Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*

It initially seems like the goofiest of non sequiturs. Jesus is transfigured...shining in glory...talking to visions and Peter is talking about building a shelter out of a bunch of sticks.

But wait...in Peter's mountaintop moment. He has remembered something. Remembering and honoring the past is important. He remembered that Moses too went up on the mountain with 3 named companions and after speaking with God the skin of his face shone too. And then Peter remembers that among the many many things God told Moses: he asked Moses to institute the Festival of Booths/also known as Sukkot.

Every year you shall live in booths for seven days; all who are native-born in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Peter's offering to make 3 booths then for the three prophets is NOT some whacky and out of context mistake but faithful. After all...these are the same sort of intricate booths that Peter makes on his yearly pilgrimage to the temple : a temporary shelter woven out of three different kinds of trees...*from palm trees and leafy trees and willows by the brook and through whose woven ceiling one could see of the immensity stars and feel the enormity of the grace of God on which everything depends.* And so listening w the text, we lean in, wondering how Jesus will respond to Peter's traditional but faithful offering. But instead of hearing Jesus, Peter James and John HEAR the voice of God (in the voice of Eric Rennie) and they fall to the ground in terror.

This is my Son, the beloved with whom I am well pleased, Listen to him!

In other words instead of listening *for me* in a booth, listen to Jesus...who is standing right in front of you!
This is a new story of change which is both painful and hopeful.

It is poignant to remember that at the same time our Christian tradition was being written down for the first time, the Holy Temple of Jerusalem, the biggest booth of them all.. was being torn down by the Roman empire.

What can you say in the ruins of the old story? In all that loss, is there a life-giving truth to be found?

Do not be afraid, whispers Jesus

The new story is that God doesn't need a booth or a temple. Jesus *is* the temple
And if we deeply listen to him, a sanctuary will light up inside ourselves

This is the air I breathe. This is the air I breathe the praise band sang. *This is the air I breathe... Your holy presence living in me.* Lord God how might **we** become a lamp shining in a dark place?

Today is a good day.

Today is also a good day because we are baptizing Anthony Michael Cefalu... the first child of the first couple whose marriage ceremony I performed here at Holy Trinity... who is actually the first child of the first marriage ceremony I performed anywhere...EVER... in my entire life! So how awesome is that?

And they look good and they are still married! And today is a good day because even as we welcome Anthony and his family more deeply and permanently and non-dissolvably into our hearts and our wider Christian community, we also have the opportunity to recommit to our own baptismal vows.

Lord God how might **we...** not only as individuals but as a community be a lamp shining in a dark place?

Here are just two of those vows we will say in a few minutes.

Consider saying them as if you've never said them before.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

I will with God's help

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

I will with God's help

I put these words from our baptismal covenant out on the sign out front this week to let our light shine before others as I said I would two weeks ago, and to proclaim publicly that this covenant expresses our intention and to remind all of us ... myself included, that we are still learning what that intention **might call us to do here in Middletown.**

Recently I had an opportunity to listen in to a conversation between our new Bishop Jeffrey Mello and our Canon for Mission Advocacy and Racial Justice, Ranjit Mathews. This week, our canon Ranjit is one of only 4 representatives from the Episcopal Church in America meeting in Ghana to discuss the challenges of maintaining – or restoring – unity among the worldwide Anglican Communion's 42 provinces at a time of stark divisions over human sexuality and marriage equality.

I pray for Ranjit. Dear God, help Ranjit seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving his neighbor as himself. Help him to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Ranjit will preach for us here at CHT on Mar 19 and lead a forum on difficult conversations. He'll have had a lot of practice.

But now I want to share just a small bit of our Bishop Jeff's and Canon Ranjit's conversation about Justice because I think it will give you a sense of his way of thinking. And simultaneously it may shed some light on the meaning of our baptismal covenant and how these promises are meant to transfigure us.

Ranjit begins: *Bishop Jeff, one of the things that you shared with me recently was the fact that you look at this work of racial justice not as a program, but really as a lens. And I wondered if you just shared a little bit more about that with our community?*

Bishop Mello: *For me, when I approached the work of racial justice, I think it's all too often easy to silo it and push it as a program. Just another thing that we're supposed to be doing... For me, what's been really helpful and transformative in my own life and my own work around racial justice, is to **really see the work of racial justice as a lens through which I see all the work that we are called to do as a church.** So we look at our liturgy through the lens of racial justice, our Sunday school, our outreach, all the ways we are of being community, we take on a lens of racial justice work to ask important questions as we engage in all of the different ministries and programs that we offer. But it's not another thing we tack on. It's something central to who we are as a gathered community.*

*I think it comes down to why it is we think we're about this work, is it we're doing it because it's something we can check off and say, we've done that, or is it about our transformation. We're called to be made more and more into the likeness of Christ. And so for me, **by moving it from a program that I participate in, to a lens that I take on, it becomes more about being central to who I am, and who I'm longing and trying to become as a follower of Jesus Christ.***

So today is a good day. Jesus transfigured and a baby baptized.

Lord God: let the baptism today remind us of who we are as followers of Christ. Let them remind us of what we must do: transfigure us more and more into your likeness, that we might be a lamp shining in a dark place.

Amen.