

The Remover of Obstacles
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14:16

“The Remover of Obstacles” Pilgrim Church UCC, February 26, 2017, (Exodus 24:12-18 & Matthew 17:1-9) Transfiguration Sunday

In almost six years as your pastor, I’ve never given the same sermon twice. Rarely have I even shared an illustration again, but today will be an exception. The first sermon you ever heard me preach at Pilgrim was on the Transfiguration. Since this is the last Transfiguration Sunday we’ll have together, it felt fitting to somehow end where we began. Maybe you’ll recall some of this slightly edited sermon from March 6, 2011.

For today is Transfiguration Sunday. We remember the story of Moses on the mountain with God for 40 days and 40 nights receiving the Commandments. And we remember Jesus on another mountain being transformed before the eyes of his companions into a figure of divine light. For modern Mainline Protestants this may be a strange Sunday—just another miracle story to explain away since it makes us uncomfortable. Because how can we wrap our heads around Jesus’ face shining like the sun, his clothes becoming dazzling white, and the voice of God booming out of a cloud?

Yet, the Transfiguration is a hopeful story. It’s celebrated with an all-night vigil in the Eastern Orthodox tradition and is one of their 12 Great Feasts. Because for Eastern Christians, Christ on the mountain represents deified humanity. The Transfiguration of Jesus confirms that humans are created in the divine image of God and part of God’s good creation. Humans are most human when we are united with God—that unification is shown outwardly when Jesus is bathed in heavenly light atop Mt. Tabor. The Transfiguration is one of the best Biblical stories to hold up the inherent goodness and worth of humanity—a belief that many Christians hold.

The imagery in the Transfiguration is remarkable. Light as a literary metaphor can mean knowledge, prosperity, or a sphere of the Divine. We hear Biblical phrases like, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”[1] Or Jesus declaring, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”[2] So the Transfiguration as literature alone emphasizes the holiness of humanity, revealing the divine light of God found within all of us.[3] But perhaps we have trouble understanding the Transfiguration in modernity because it seems like an isolated incident on a lonely mountain. Well, I have my own mountaintop moment to tell.

Years ago I went to Karnataka, India to experience the work that my mentor, Rev. Pashington Obeng, has made the center of his life. While there, I was distracted. On day 4 of the trip Pash asked, “My friend, what’s on your heart?” And I began to cry and incoherently stammered something about transitions and my uncertain future and I’m an unemployed loser living at home with my parents. Pash listened and advised that I try to be fully present here and now. The problems would be there to come back to. But maybe I could come home with a different perspective and new strength for life’s challenges.

The next day we traveled to Hampi to see the ruins of one of India’s Empires and a famous Hindu Temple. We walked around the Temple in our bare feet (you have to take your shoes off inside.) And I was just feeling the warmth of the stones underneath, and looking around at the monkeys wreaking havoc as they ran around, and people praying to statues of Hindu gods and goddesses, and smelling the incense burning at altars—taking in these religious expressions. And then I saw him. At first, I had to remind myself where we were because it was so

disconcerting. There was a huge male Indian Elephant in a vestibule happily munching on some hay. Pramod (our friend and driver) asked if I would like to give an offering to the elephant. So we walked up to this elephant painted with traditional Hindu symbols on his head and ears and we fed him bananas and even got to pet his trunk. Then Pramod said, “Okay, now the elephant will bless you.”

Confused at first, the elephant handler seemed to assume that my hesitation meant that fear was overtaking me. He related, “Elephant is nice elephant, trained elephant, not scary!” Part of the reason the elephant handler reassured me of this elephant’s apparent kindness was because we witnessed children screaming and writhing around in their parents’ arms when the parents attempted to have the elephant bless their babies. But I was not about to make a scene at this Hindu Temple. Figured that if the elephant attacked and I survived, well it would be a hilarious story to tell one day anyway.

So Pramod put 10 rupees in my hand and I extended the money out to the elephant as instructed. The elephant took the bill out of my outstretched hand with his trunk, flipped it behind him to the trainer, and gently laid his trunk on my head to bless me. He kept his trunk on my head for a few seconds and then lifted his trunk away and seemed to study me as intensely as I was studying him. Pramod then bowed to this mighty symbol of the Hindu god Ganesh and we went on our way. The rest of the day was amazing! I was just so happy, emanating joy from within. My burdens had somehow lightened. Kept saying to Pash, “I got blessed by an elephant, how cool is that?” I even kind-of wanted to add it to my resume—it was that amazing.

So here’s the thing, the Transfiguration is not just about these one-time miracles on Mt. Sinai in the case of Moses or Mt. Tabor in the case of Jesus. We all can have moments of transformation in our lives. Our mountaintop moments can often be difficult to share and sometimes beyond language itself. But we can have experiences where the glory of God is revealed or we somehow come back into the inner peace of our best selves. The Transfiguration is not just about the divinity of Jesus or the holiness of Moses, it is about the inherent goodness of their respective humanity. Theologian Scot McKnight argues: “The Transfiguration is one of those moments when a full disclosure of life’s mystery bursts open, brushes up against us, and reminds us that ‘all is elsewhere’ . . . What we see in Jesus’ transfiguration is not so much his deity, but the glorification of his humanity—what all humans really and potentially are.”[4] We have the potential for transformation and we may be those dazzling figures in light basking in the presence of God now.

Both Moses and Jesus go up their respective mountains not just to experience God, but to get centered in themselves. They weren’t just religious experiences from without. But were moments of renewal and reawakening from within. In order to have these moments of renewal, both Moses and Jesus had to prepare themselves and those around them for what was to come.

When Moses leaves to trek up Mt. Sinai with Joshua he sets his affairs in order. He knows that he’ll be gone for a while, so Moses says to the elders, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”[5] Moses asks the people to fend for themselves in the meantime. He’s preparing himself for this journey and goes up with only Joshua to eventually face God in the cloud alone. When Moses comes back down, his face glows with a divine light.

In the case of Jesus, he goes up Mt. Tabor with just three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John. Fittingly when the disciples witness all of this glory with Elijah (representing the Prophets) and Moses (representing the Law) and then Jesus glorified in divine light—well, they pass out in fear. Jesus has to wake them up saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”[6] By the

time the disciples come to, Jesus is again on the mountain by himself reassuring them to fear not.

In both stories, Moses and Jesus go up their respective mountains to commune with God and to be at peace with themselves. Even Moses and Jesus had to have moments of calm amid the storms of life. Even Moses and Jesus had to revel in the delight of God's presence. But in order to have these miraculous moments, they had to get their hearts and minds prepared for what was to come. In my moment of Transfiguration, the elephant blessing wouldn't have been joyful had I not had the conversation with Pash first. I had to admit out loud that I was distracted, carrying some burdens, and needed to find a way to let them go while in India. I wanted to be aware of all the amazing sites we would see and people we would meet. And needed to leave some burdens behind in order to just be in the presence of God and appreciate the experiences.

Here's the funny thing—Pash looked at me the day after the elephant blessing and commented that my face seemed to be glowing. I attributed this glow to being sunburnt, applying lots of sunscreen and mosquito repellent, and just being hot and sweaty in India in general. But he laughed and said, "No, no, no, you look like Moses when he came down the mountain." We both got a good laugh at that, though the elephant somehow blessed me back to myself. The apparent outer glow was all because of feeling joyful inside. What's especially fitting is that Ganesh (the Hindu god often depicted with an elephant's head) is known as the Remover of Obstacles and the Lord of Beginnings.

Transfigurations are about beginnings. We don't need to think about the Transfiguration as only one isolated incident in the life of Jesus and even before that as a few times that Moses came down Mt. Sinai after communing with God glowing before the eyes of his people. No. Transfigurations happen in our lives when we open ourselves to God and the world around us. Transfigurations happen when we can leave some of our burdens behind to walk up our own mountains. Transfigurations happen when we can sit in the Divine presence, renewed and ready to climb back down to face the challenges of life again. And if we try, just try to see ourselves the way that God sees humanity—maybe we'll realize that we are dazzling and awe-inspiring. In the eyes of our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer—we are glowing and emanating divine light every minute of every day. For we are Children of God, with whom God is well pleased. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Psalm 27:1, NRSV.

[2] John 8:12.

[3] James Rowe Adams, "Light" in *The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors: From Literal to Literary*, 178-180.

[4] Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others*, 259-260 and 261.

[5] Exodus 24:14.

[6] Matthew 17:7.