

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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During Youth Group a few weeks ago, we were watching a video that talked about how important it is that Jesus came to the world as a poor baby from Bethlehem, which the video jokingly and not-so-nicely referred to as a “backwater of a backwater town in those days.” And after the video, I asked the youth why they thought it mattered that Jesus came to us in this form, from a tiny little town, as a humble baby in a manger, when he didn’t have to.

And one of them, I won’t name names, said “honestly? I think Jesus should have just come on a flying shiny unicorn. That would have been way cooler.”

I thought about that a lot this week, because although we unfortunately never get to see Jesus riding on a flying shiny unicorn, our Gospel today is perhaps as close as we get to flying unicorn Jesus.

Today we read that Jesus is completely transfigured before Peter, James, and John—that his face shines like the sun, and his clothes become bright as light, and that Moses and Elijah appear next to him. And we hear that a bright cloud overshadows them and a voice from heaven declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” This is a spectacular, awe-inspiring, divine moment that completely knocks us back with its power.

But it's also kind of strange and mysterious. You see, when we talked about this idea of unicorn Jesus in Youth Group, most everyone agreed that (of course!) that would've been awesome. But one of the Youth pointed out that unicorn Jesus doesn't really work, because he's not very relatable. And I think there's something so wise about that statement—after all, it's easy to look at this text and go “okay, this is cool and all for Jesus, but what does this really mean for me? Why is Transfiguration Sunday so important?”

To understand why, we need to remember what happened just before our Gospel story today. Just a few days earlier Jesus began to tell his disciples for the first time that he was going to suffer and die and be resurrected, which leads to that infamous interaction where Peter rebukes Jesus and Jesus responds “Get behind me Satan!” And then, Jesus tells his disciples that anyone who follows him must deny themselves and take up their cross, that whoever would save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for his sake will save it.

That's not the message the disciples wanted to hear! They had left everything behind to follow Jesus. At this point they had been with Jesus as he taught parables and healed people and attracted crowds. They had seen him walk on water and feed the 5,000 and raise a girl from the dead. It would have felt like the beginning of something triumphant, a sign that the Messiah was here to liberate them at last. So hearing that Jesus was going to die? That would have shaken the very foundation of their world.

And so, six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain as they feel like everything is changing around them. And when Jesus is transfigured before them, when his face shines like the sun and Moses and

Elijah appear, Peter says “Lord it is good for us to be here; if you wish I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” In other words, he wants to build a dwelling place to honor them, to mark this glorious moment, to make it possible for them to stay here together.

Now Peter has gotten a lot of crap for offering this over the years, with many scholars arguing that Peter was just doing whatever he could to keep Jesus and Moses and Elijah on the mountain. But who could blame him? If you had just been told that suffering and death were ahead, wouldn't you also want to stay on the mountain? If you had been told that your entire world was about to end, wouldn't you want to hold on to glory just a little bit longer?

Rev. Eric Fistler, who produces the wonderful Pulpit Fiction podcast that I highly recommend, points out that in many ways, Peter's tents are like our churches today: we too build sacred spaces, we too mark holy moments, we too gather week after week to be in community together. And on one hand, there's nothing wrong with that; in fact having places where we can be together in community, where we can feel Christ dwelling with us most fully is important, especially when our world feels unstable.

The problem is not so much what Peter wanted to experience, but rather what Peter wanted to avoid: he wants to stay on the mountain, not simply to experience the presence of God, but to avoid the suffering that he knows comes at the bottom. He wants the glory without the descent, the shining powerful unicorn Christ without the Christ born in a backwater town who is destined to suffer and die. And if we can be honest with ourselves, I think we sometimes want the same thing. When the world feels chaotic, and injustice feels overwhelming, we come to church wanting comfort, wanting certainty,

wanting something easy and unchanging to hold onto. I can admit that I certainly have.

As Rev. Fistler puts it, “too often we come to church, we participate in church, but we do not expect transformation.” And it’s right here, on this mountain, that we are called to ask ourselves this question: do we come to church expecting to be transformed and sent or are we hoping to stay comfortable? Are we gathering in this sacred tent expecting God to change us, or are we gathering to preserve a version of our faith that feels safe?

Because the voice that comes down from the cloud in our Gospel today does not say “Stay here, where it is comfortable.”

Instead, the voice says “listen to him.” In saying this, the voice confirms everything the disciples feared: that Jesus’ radiance on this mountain does not erase the fact that he’s destined to suffer and die on the cross. That God’s voice claiming him from heaven does not erase the fact that the disciples are called to take up their cross and follow Jesus. And in response to this realization, the disciples fall to the ground and are utterly overcome with fear.

And again, who can blame them? Transformation is terrifying. It’s one thing to admire Jesus in all his glory atop the mountain, and another thing to follow him down that mountain. It’s one thing to follow Jesus when he is healing crowds and walking on water, but it’s another thing to follow him to the cross. And it’s one thing for all of us to come to church every week, but it’s another thing to walk out these doors and allow our entire lives to be transformed by Christ, with all that that implies. It’s understandable to hear the call in this Gospel and, like the disciples, feel utterly overcome with fear.

But the wonderful news in our Gospel today is that within this fear, Jesus speaks remarkable words of grace to his disciples, and to all of us. Jesus comes to his disciples and touches them. Jesus comes to their level and says “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Back in Youth Group, after one of the youth said that unicorn Jesus wouldn't be relatable enough, I asked them why it mattered that Jesus was relatable. One of them said, “because it's important that we know that Jesus is just like us.” Another said, “because when we know that Jesus has been through what we've been through, we know we're not alone.” (I know we have some really awesome youth, don't we?!)

This is the promise we get in our Gospel today. When the disciples raise their eyes, they see Jesus—alone and no longer shining—waiting for them. When Jesus sees that the disciples are overwhelmed with fear, he comes down to their level and touches them. He shows them that he, too, is human, that he, too, understands the fear that they're feeling. He shows them that even though he has the option to choose glory and power and heavenly voices from clouds, he instead chooses them and us, every single time. And then he says “Get up and do not be afraid.”

The Greek word Jesus uses for “get up” here is the same word that's later used to describe Jesus' resurrection. Jesus is not simply saying “get up.” He's promising the disciples that there is new life to be had amidst the fear they are feeling, that even though they feel like their world is ending and everything is changing around them, God is still at work, even now, making something new.

And of course, Jesus' words "do not be afraid," don't make the disciples' fear magically disappear. But these words do invite the disciples to not let fear have the final say, to instead see the new life that God is creating and, amidst fear, take the next step anyway. After all, the disciples did not follow Jesus down off the mountain with full understanding or total faith; we will see proof of that in their story ahead. But they did come down from that mountain with the promise that they would be loved always, with the promise that Christ would never leave them. They came down the mountain with a voice to trust and a command to follow. And they came down the mountain transformed, with the ability to take the next step into their new life, despite their fear.

So perhaps this answers the question of why Transfiguration Sunday is important for us—perhaps it's not about Jesus' transfiguration at all, but about the disciples and our transformation. Perhaps it's important to have one Sunday each year to remind us that even when we feel like the world is ending, even when we're full of fear, Jesus still reaches across the ages and invites us to "get up"—to be resurrected, to be transformed, and to take the next step off the mountain and out into the world, trusting that God is at work, even now, making things new.

Today, we celebrate Transfiguration Sunday as we do every year, as the bridge between our seasons of Epiphany and Lent, because from this moment forward, Jesus is journeying to the cross. As we move into Lent in the weeks ahead, we'll be accompanying Jesus through our sermon series to the theme: "Seeking: Deeper Questions for Honest Faith." And maybe this Sunday gives us our first deeper question to think about in the week ahead. Transfiguration Sunday calls us to consider: What is our faith asking of us? Or rather, what is our faith asking of Wicker Park Lutheran Church?

Transfiguration Sunday reminds us that we are being called out of this tent where it is comfortable and down the mountain where we know change and danger lie ahead. It reminds us that we are being called out of our church and into the world—into our relationships, into the streets, into our communities. And it reminds us that instead of the dazzling unicorn Jesus, we have something even better: the Jesus who touches us, transforms us, and sends us—even amidst fear—to take the next faithful step into God's unfolding kingdom.