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*“After Six Days”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 17:1-9

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After six days. After six days. Do you think there could be any significance to the fact that St. Matthew referred to a six-day period before Jesus led them to the mountain where he was transfigured? Well, for my part, I'd like to think so. You see, after six days, is the seventh day. The seventh day which infers the Sabbath. A time set apart as holy, to worship God, to rest in God's presence. And think about it – for six days what have you been doing or going through? What pressures have you felt, what frustrations have you experienced – still dealing with masks, no family events, no socializing, trying to get a vaccination appointment, plus the normal health issues, family concerns and whatever else life throws at you. Yes, life is difficult, and staying grounded in God is sometimes a hard task. Human situations can fall apart, and need to be built back up again. And so, after six days, here on this seventh day, you and I come together to worship, to renew our faith, to be elevated, to be transformed, and, even in a sense, transfigured.

And, that's important. Because none of us know all the answers when it comes to this life and especially our faith. God doesn't regularly come to us, speaking to us out of a cloud or in a dream. There are few angelic appearances that I know of, and even fewer legendary prophets that guide us along our way. No, on the whole, we have none of those things. So through the years we tend to piece together little snippets of faith to live by: that sunset over the ocean that reminds us of creation and the Creator, the beauty and innocence of a little child, a meaningful time alone in prayer with our Maker, a favorite Bible verse, hearing a beautiful hymn or musical piece, the fellowship and love of friends and family, and of course, the Sabbath, hearing the Word and spiritual wisdom of the Bible. And yet, down deep, don't we often want more? More assurances, more answers, more understanding? Yes, I think we want more! We want to see and know and experience the glory of God.

And that's what happens to the disciples at the Transfiguration, when Jesus takes his inner circle – Peter, James and John to the mountaintop. Although the center of the story is all about a transfigured Jesus and his identity, it's also a story about what it means to be a faithful disciple. The Transfiguration is a major event, told not only by St. Matthew, but also by St. Mark and St. Luke. It comes fairly late in Jesus' ministry and it could be said that the Transfiguration was the “beginning of the end” of his earthly life. Because it points him, and us, squarely on the road to Jerusalem and the road to the cross and

ultimately, Easter. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's get back to today's scripture and what it can teach us through the disciples. To set the stage, it was just six days earlier that Jesus told his disciples plainly, for the first time, that it would be necessary for him to “suffer many things and be killed,” but that he would rise again to new life on the third day. But the disciples really can't comprehend what Jesus is saying or what he means - dying and coming back to life again. Who could? If any one of us had heard Jesus say this, we wouldn't be able to understand or comprehend either. So Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a mountaintop, because it symbolizes the human ascent to God. And there, on the mountaintop, the disciples witness the “more” I was just talking about. So let's look at some of the things that happened up there.

First, Jesus is transfigured into an almost indescribable being. His face shone like the sun, his appearance changed, and his clothes become “dazzling white.” Now Mark emphasizes the fact by saying, “dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them.” That’s how Jesus was described – simply, as “shining like the sun” and “whiter than bleach.” This imagery is meant to convey to them that a source of light exists that is so great, all clarity and understanding becomes immediately apparent. And this light, the divine light, is emanating through God's son. Now imagine being Peter, James or John – the light and glory of God being revealed right before your eyes, in and through the person of Jesus Christ, this man you’ve been following. Then what happens? Here come the two major figures from the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses, representing the law, and Elijah, representing the prophets, and they strike up a conversation with Jesus. Now the Bible tells us that both Moses and Elijah often went to the mountaintop to consult with God as to what was happening in the valley below. So that they could fix things. And Luke tells us that on this mountaintop, they talked to Jesus about his great sacrifice and impending death, in the same manner, in order to fix things in the valley below. Now, as you can imagine, Peter, James and John are standing there totally awestruck, when Peter blurts out, “Lord it is good for us to be here. If you wish I can put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Duh! Hello! Do we honestly think these men from heaven need an earthly place to stay? Obviously, this was a dumb comment. But the disciples have found themselves in some “other worldly place” that conflicts with our conventional understandings and preferred ways of behaving. And to be honest, how many of us have been in an unusual or difficult situation, and not knowing what to say, we begin to babble or blurt out something that's irrelevant, or off-base, or even stupid. But more important than Peter's confusion, is that emotion one feels in the presence of what can only be described as divine. It's like that incredible sunset over the ocean I was speaking about earlier, those moments we

experience and know that they are a gift from God. So there is Peter – standing before the transfigured Jesus, and he fittingly remarks at the awe of what is happening before him and to him. Yes, "It is good for us to be here."

Next, while Peter was speaking, a bright cloud covered them. Again, picture this – Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah, shining in the exquisite brightness and radiance of glory, when a cloud overshadows them all, and God speaks directly to the three disciples, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Listen to him! At this point, Peter, James and John fall to the ground terrified, as we could all well imagine. But it's not the words that terrify the disciples. It is the very sound of the voice, the very presence of God. And can you blame them? You see, to experience God beyond the dimension in which we exist, would probably create fear in every one of us as well. This experience on the mountaintop would make any person quake. The disciples have been taught that no one can see God and live. So they don't want to look up. That is until Jesus comes over to them, touches them, and removes their fear, saying, "Get up, and do not be afraid." And then, it's over, and they head back down the mountain, back to the valley.

Now this mountaintop experience of the disciples was an extraordinary event. One that holds profound significance not only for them, but for us as well. For if we can trust in what those disciples saw and heard on the mountaintop, then they have experienced the "more" we are looking for. The divine power and majesty and glory of Almighty God, which, in reality, is accessible also to us. After all, isn't that what worship is all about? To experience the divine "awe." But sometimes we don't because after six days down here in the valley, we tend to close our eyes and our minds to all that God is, and all that God wants us to become. In her book, "Teaching a Stone to Talk," Annie Dillard writes about this. She says, "*On the whole I do not find Christians sufficiently sensible (when we gather for worship). Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke (every Sunday)? Or, does anyone believe a word of it? We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares and should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake up someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.*" Draw us out to where we can never return. That's why the transfiguration story is about what it means to be a faithful disciple. Because once we've experienced Christ in all his glory and honor, we don't want to return to our old ways. Rather we want to move toward that which is holy, which is righteous, which is Christ-like. That's why the most important words we heard today were the words of God, "This is my

Son, listen to Him!” Listen to him! And with Lent just a few days away, and Easter and Christ's great sacrifice beyond that, this is the perfect time to do our best to let go and work toward correcting those sins and faults and shortcomings that obscure our vision of the mountaintop. Yes, listen to him, for he offers us the words and promises and assurances we need for this life and the next: words of forgiveness, words of wisdom, and especially, words of love. Christ alone offers us “the more” that we so desperately desire and that can bring us to a place from which we can never return. Amen!