

Weather Forecast, Partially Cloudy

St. Matthew 17:1-9

I want to talk about something else for a few moments. I'll get around to this story we call the Transfiguration in a few minutes, but first I want to talk about something else, something that we do often but don't often talk about — namely, the liturgy. We come to church on Sunday, and every Sunday we do the liturgy, and for just a few minutes that's what I want to talk about.

Some of us really like the liturgy, and some of us see it as just something we have to do to get to the main part, the real point of coming to church: maybe that's the sermon, or maybe it's the holy communion, or maybe it's to see a few good friends again. I think the liturgy is a real gift, a largely unrecognized gift. Or to put it in other rather unchurchly terms, I think the liturgy is fun. I think it is good for us, and in a sense fun for us, to come to church and say, after what has been for us a good week or maybe a bad week, to say: Lord, have mercy; to say: Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth; to say little prayers like: make us heirs with Christ of your glory and bring us to enjoy its fulness; or like last week, help us to see and understand the things we ought to do, and give us grace and power to do them; supremely to say: this is the feast of victory for our God!

I think it's Dr. Seuss who says somewhere, It's fun to have fun, but you have to know how. So what I want to say is this: it's fun to have fun in church, and the liturgy aims to teach us how. It's fun to swim, we might say, or it's fun to ride a bicycle, but you have to learn how. So we might say, It's fun to come to church, and It's fun to do the liturgy, but you have to know how.

The liturgy is very old, most of it: it's the way people have been having fun in church for nearly twenty centuries. The liturgy is a largely unrecognized gift from the ancient past, and it's given to us not as something we *gotta* do but as something we *get* to do: to praise God, to pray to God, to sing and to be silent together, to listen, and even to eat and drink and to shake one another's hand. All of that is what we may do in the liturgy. It's what we *get* to do here, it's good for us, and it can be fun. It's fun to have fun like this, but

you have to learn how. The liturgy is teaching us...teaching us how to have fun with our God. I hope you like having fun this way, I hope you like (and maybe even love) the liturgy. And if you're not so good at it yet, it will come with practice. It's a great gift that Lutherans and others around the world cherish.

Now let's think a bit about the transfiguration. That's the name we give to the event, or the story, that is told in today's gospel lesson from St. Matthew. I'm glad we got to start our service today singing "Beautiful Savior." And following this sermon we will get to sing another favorite hymn, "Shine, Jesus, Shine." How fitting they both are on this Sunday, the Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

We have had some bright and beautiful days this winter here in Florida, and even when it's been terribly cold, it has often been terribly bright, very sunny. (Of course, people up north have laughed at us when we told them how cold it has got, here in Florida.) January and half of February are Epiphany time in the church, and it's fitting that Epiphany be a bright time because Epiphany is the season of God's brightness, God's shining and revealing himself in Jesus for all the world to see and love and trust. Jesus, we say, is the revelation, the coming to light on earth of God's splendor and God's power and God's love. I like to say it this way: Jesus is what God looks like when God fully shines through a human being as God wants to shine through us all. That's what it means to be made in the image of God, and Jesus is that image. That's the bright message of Epiphany. This week, beginning on Wednesday, by way of contrast, we come to the season of Lent, and Lent is not a bright season but rather a season of shadows and sorrows.

But for today the weather forecast is partially cloudy both inside the church and outside, according to last night's weather forecast. And now that you've heard the story again, you know why, don't you? Jesus takes Peter and James and John up a high mountain, and he is transfigured before them (he becomes very bright with light, as if a spotlight were shining on him), and Moses

and Elijah come by to talk, and Peter says, It's good to be here, let's stay a while. And then, all of a sudden, a bright cloud overshadows them (that's why we say it's "partially cloudy"; at least it's a "bright" cloud - it has to be because God's voice is in that cloud) - a bright cloud overshadows them, and from the cloud the voice said: "This is my Son, this is my beloved Son! I am real pleased with him! And my word to all of you on earth is, Listen to him!" Peter and James and John are overwhelmed, they fall to the ground in fear (they've probably never heard a talking cloud before!), but Jesus gives them a hand and says, Don't be afraid, and so they get up...and they go home.

It happened on a mountain. I like mountains, don't you? I wish we had more mountains and hills here in Florida. The Bible likes mountains — mountains in the Bible are ways of drawing close to God. First there was Mt. Sinai, and we heard about that in our first lesson today. Moses went up Mt. Sinai (right there just a short distance east of Egypt), and he got caught in a cloud, a talking cloud, too. A cloud covered Mt. Sinai for seven days, and God spoke to Moses out of that cloud, and what God said to Moses turned out to be in large part what we call the Ten Commandments. God was telling the people at Mt. Sinai to listen to him — to learn how to be a beloved community together, to not curse, kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet, to keep Sabbath and to honor parents and to look to him as their God/their rescuer from tyranny. Mt. Sinai is a very big event in the Bible.

And after Mt. Sinai comes Mt. Nebo — this is where Jesus goes up and gets transfigured and hears God call him his beloved Son and comes down pumped and primed and ready for the climax of his life and ministry.

And not long after Mt. Nebo comes Mt. Calvary, where Jesus goes up, and gets crucified, and all the lights go out. There is darkness, thick darkness everywhere, it says, when Jesus dies. But in a sense this is when all the lights begin to come on again... because what we get from Mt. Calvary is Easter, and holy communion, and church for 2,000 years now, healing for the past and hope for the future...and a life (your life and my life) that gets lived between the surprise of birth and the surprise of...well, I don't know what the next surprise is because it hasn't happened yet. The Bible calls it resurrection, and Jesus got resurrected, but exactly what that's going to be like for you and me we'll have to wait and see. It's kind of exciting.

That's why we say, Weather forecast - partially cloudy. But remember, this is a bright cloud...because God speaks to us out of this cloud, and what he says is plain and simple, Listen to him, listen to Jesus, and let his light heal you and brighten your world and transfigure all your days. Follow Jesus and listen to him. So that's what we set ourselves to do again, now that we have come to church and done the liturgy. And that's what we set ourselves to do again in a special way, starting Wednesday, as we move from Epiphany to Lent. That's why we do all these things: come to church and do the liturgy and make a special observance of Lent. It's because God has said to us about Jesus, This is my man, this is my beloved Son, you gotta hear him.

Yes, we do! And we will!

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