

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration Sunday, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
February 19, 2023

He Touched Them

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

On the Church calendar, today is the last Sunday after Epiphany, and is known as Transfiguration Sunday. In our Old Testament Lesson from the 24th chapter of the Book of Exodus, we read of God's instruction to Moses to come up to God on Mount Sinai where Moses would be given the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments.

Well, there on the mountain is the glory of the Lord, like a devouring fire. These images recur throughout scripture and come to their "high point" in our Gospel Lesson about the Transfiguration of Jesus. Listen to these words from Exodus 24:12-18 . . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson from the 17th chapter of Matthew we have a story that is recorded in all three of the Synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Second Peter refers to it (1:16-18). The story comes just after Jesus speaks to his disciples of taking up a cross.

For the famous Renaissance master Raphael, his last painting was "The Transfiguration." He worked on it until his death in 1520. And it is now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana Museum in Vatican City. Listen to these words from Matthew 17:1-9. . .

Sermon

On the Church calendar, Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany come to an end today, and on Ash Wednesday we begin our Lenten journey which leads to a cross on a hill far away. And to the joy of Easter and the Resurrection. Yes, Jesus has been born in Bethlehem; the carols have

been sung, Jesus has been received by Simeon, and the wise men have brought precious gifts. Jesus has grown in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God. With his baptism Jesus' ministry began—a ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. And now with the cross and the meaning of his Sonship coming into sharper focus, the Transfiguration confirms Jesus' identity as the glorious Son of God. It is a bright shining event, before we head on to the ashes of Lent.

To be sure, this happening is so awesome, so mysterious, that anything we might say today seems inadequate to the moment. Like Peter's offer to commemorate the occasion by building three booths, three dwellings—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. The Transfiguration just defies attempts to capture its glory.

In our Gospel lesson Matthew tells us that at the Transfiguration on a high mountain, Peter and James and his brother John beheld the glory of Jesus, with his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appeared, talking with Jesus. And Peter suggests building booths, perhaps wanting to prolong this experience of glory, perhaps wanting to rejoice in the “heavenly Jesus” rather than go to Jerusalem and watch his master suffer a painful death.

Well, even as Peter was still speaking,

suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” (Mt. 17:5-7)

Here Matthew echoes the terror and dismay of the Israelites in Exodus 20 when they heard the voice of God (v. 18) and cried out to Moses,

“You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” (v. 19)

The glorious presence and commanding voice of the Holy One of Israel threatened to overwhelm those who encountered them.

Dr. Kimberly Clayton, the Director of Contextual Education at Columbia Theological Seminary, tells the story of visiting her grandparents in Florida at the age of seven. It was a big treat to get to sleep on a sofa in the living room, out there by herself in that large space. But on this particular visit there was something new and different in the living room. Something or someone was staring at her from a table across the room. What it was, was a statue—the figure of a man with horns. And he did not look happy.

The young girl tried to fall asleep, but couldn't. She turned her back to the figure and pulled the covers over her head, but it didn't help. She got up and turned the statue around, but that didn't help either. Dr. Clayton says she can't remember whether she went to get her parents, or whether they heard her tossing and turning; but happily they did intervene and the statue was put away in a closet—with a coat placed over him for good measure.

In Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses there is a long beard, two tablets, and yes, two horns sticking right out of the top of his head. Now the Hebrew word for "shining" is identical to the word for "horn," except for the vowels, which we are told in Hebrew can be very confusing. So some interpreters, like Michelangelo, determined that Moses, after his encounter with the glory of God on Mount Sinai, had sprouted horns, not light. Anyway, every summer when Kimberly Clayton went to visit, her grandmother would put away the statue of Moses, banishing it to a coat closet, because it frightened her.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John understand that fear all too well. They fall to the ground, overcome by fear. (Mt. 17:6) But what happens? Jesus comes to them and touches them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." (17:7)

One of my Columbia Seminary classmates of long ago, Patrick Wilson, now retired and living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, noted how a human touch can banish our fears. He says that for John Calvin, this was the great genius of God, to allow his hopes for us to be communicated in an ordinary human touch.

This was the God who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. The God whose greatness is so vast that not even the heavens above can contain it. This is the eternal God of all creation. Yet, this same God is willing in the fullness of time to come to us, to reach out and touch us, and still our fears. In the angel's promise of Matthew 1 (v. 23), we read that they shall name the Christ Child, Emmanuel, which means "God with us." Therefore, Jesus' hand on the shoulders of the disciples, is nothing less than the touch of God.

It is marvelous indeed to contemplate how the God of all eternity comes to us, not simply in a wondrous cloud of mystery, not only a voice thundering from heaven, but also a human hand laid upon a shoulder, with these words, "Do not be afraid."

Usually in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' touch is associated with healing. For example, in chapter 8, verse, 3, when Jesus is confronted by a man with a skin disease, we read that Jesus reached out his hand and touched him, and instantly he was healed. Or again, in 8:14 Jesus sees Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. "He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve them." And there's that unforgettable story in Matthew, Mark, and Luke about a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years. She had spent all she had on physicians, but no one could cure her. but in the midst of a pressing crowd, she managed to touch but the fringe of Jesus' garments—and immediately she was healed. Well, here in the story of The Transfiguration with a touch and words of assurance, Jesus heals three disciples of their fear.

Dr. A. B. MacDonald, in an article on the leper colony in Itu, Nigeria, of which he was in charge, writes:

The leper is sick in mind as well as body. For some reason there is an attitude to leprosy different from the attitude to any other disfiguring disease. It is associated with shame and horror, and carries, in some mysterious way, a sense of guilt, although innocently acquired like most contagious troubles. Shunned and despised, frequently do lepers consider taking their own lives and some do.

That is the kind of man who came to Jesus in Matthew 8 (1-4). He was unclean, but Jesus touched him. He was untouchable, yet Jesus touched him—and in that touch there was healing.

Ashley Montagu was a 20th century American scholar and a scientist. In his 1971 book, *Touching*, he devotes special attention to the relation of touching to mental and physical health. Dr. Montagu claims that all of us need to be caringly touched. It starts in our mothers' wombs. And it is a need that goes with us all through life.

Montagu observes that generally older people are not touched. Rarely does an elderly single person get touched in a caring way—except by the one who does their hair! There are the sad words of an elderly invalid who looked up at her faithful visitor after a farewell hug and with tears in her eyes, said: “You are the only one who ever touches me!”

Jesus reached out and touched persons in need—with a healing touch! While our hands don't have that same healing power of Jesus' hands, we do have in them something of the power to heal, and to banish fear. When we take communion to someone, we are touching them in the name of Christ. Our Parish Care Team here at Midway seeks to promote this healing ministry as we reach out and touch someone with a visit, a phone call, a card. As we provide grief booklets to those who have lost loved ones. When making a hospital visit or visiting a shut-in or spending time with a member in grief, I make a point of holding the person's hand or placing my hand on

their shoulder as we pray. And sometimes when offering prayer, the person will reach out and take my hand.

In closing, we go back to the story of Dr. Kimberly Clayton. So, now on a table across from her bed sits the statue of Moses that her grandmother gave her the year before she died. No longer does it frighten her. Quite the contrary, it is a bright, daily reminder that we are accompanied by glory. By the glory of God on Mount Sinai. By the glory of God's own Son on the Mount of Transfiguration, the glory of the same Jesus who even now, reaches out to touch us, and make us whole.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.