

We Cannot Keep God Safe

Matthew 17:1-9

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United Church of Christ
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I.

With your permission, I'd like to modify my sermon title, changing it to "We Cannot Keep God Safe."

This title communicates a double meaning not captured in the original title.

Today could just as well be called "Metamorphosis Sunday."

Metamorphothe is the Greek word in translated "Transfiguration" in Matthew 17:2.

Metamorphosis means great change or a grand reshaping.

Our Gospel story draws our attention to at least three metamorphoses.

The first is the physical metamorphosis of Jesus on the mount.

Having made his way up a high mountain with Peter and James and John, Jesus appears in a whole new light.

The text says that his face shone like the sun.

And his clothes became not just white, but dazzling white.

And then, much to the dismay of the already disoriented disciples, two figures from Israel's past appeared and were talking with him.

Moses and Elijah were both central prophetic figures in the life of Israel, and each of them had had their own mountaintop moments.

Moses had gone up Mount Sinai and came down with his face shining so brightly the people had to wear shades just to look at him.

And Elijah met God in a cave on Mount Horeb and learned that God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence.

To see Jesus glowing like the tip of a welding torch and talking with the legends of spiritual mountain climbing was not a comfort to the three disciples.

Their minds did not yet have categories to understand even a little bit of what was happening.

Perhaps this is why, after the whole ordeal was over, Jesus told them, "Tell no one about it until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

In other words, don't start talking about something you don't understand before you know the whole story.

And wait until you have a framework and some basic language to use.

Otherwise the tale you tell might sound like a bunch of gibberish.

II.

If the first metamorphosis, the first great change, had to do with Jesus appearance on the mountain, the second has to do with a change in understanding of Jesus relationship to God and the purpose of his life.

Perhaps you know that this category-busting scene in Matthew 17 immediately follows the well-known interaction between Jesus and Peter which starts with Jesus asking his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

They speculate for a while. Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, maybe Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

Then Jesus asks them, "But who do you say I am?"

And Peter, good ol' Peter, as if he'd been waiting to be called upon, blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus, as if accepting the shiny apple from his favorite student, says, "Good job, Peter. Well done. For that you get an 'A' and you can be in charge of the entire class the next time I'm away."

But while Peter is still blushing and the other disciples are still fuming at the favoritism, they almost miss it when Jesus says, "Don't tell anybody about the Messiah thing."

There it is again. In New Testament scholarship, it is called "the Messianic Secret," this hush hush about Jesus identity as the Messiah.

But I think it's less about keeping a secret and more about good pedagogy.

You see, any skilled teacher or leader meets her students or collaborators where they are and then leads them to deeper understanding.

Peter's answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," is correct, but it is also a starting point from which Jesus leads his disciples to a deeper understanding.

And this deeper understanding is, quite frankly, not something they want to hear.

The text says, "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the people in charge, and that he must be killed, and that on the third day he will be raised."

Peter, understandably disturbed by this, but not wanting to give up his "teacher's pet" status right away, takes Jesus aside and says, "Stop talking like that."

To which Jesus, basically, gives Peter his apple back and tells him to "go to hell."

The scene on the mountain six days later marks a shift in orientation for Jesus life and ministry.

Having travelled throughout Galilee, interacting with Jews and with gentiles, healing the sick, casting out demons, and proclaiming the good news, Jesus now pivots toward Jerusalem.

He has established himself as the one who embodies God's love and compassion, the one who enacts God's healing presence, the one who brings about God's

reconciliation, the one who defies the Roman authorities not through armed rebellion but by inviting people to step into the fullness of their own humanity.

Which is what "the Son of Man" means, it means the fully human one, the one who is so fully at home in his humanity that God is pleased to make a home in him.

Peter is correct in calling him the Messiah, and the son of the living God, but that only reflects Act One in the overall story.

Act Two begins on the mount of transfiguration as Jesus sets his sights on Jerusalem and embraces the flip side of messiahship, namely, that being fully human is a threat to the powers that be.

Powers both religious and political are threatened by a person who embodies the love and compassion and justice of the living God.

It's not an easy lesson to learn, but in the presence of Moses and Elijah, this is the move Jesus makes, spelling out the implications: "If anybody wants to keep following me, pick up your cross, and let's get going."

III.

The first metamorphosis was of Jesus' physical appearance, the second was a change in understanding the purpose of Jesus' life.

The third is the grand reshaping of our own life as those who continue, haltingly and imperfectly, to follow Jesus today.

Today we are on the cusp of a change of seasons.

The major key of Epiphany is about to modulate into the minor key of Lent.

Mardis Gras, or Fat Tuesday, is known within the church as Shrove Tuesday.

It marks the last day of merrymaking before the season of 40 days, plus Sundays, leading up to Holy Week.

But Shrove doesn't just mean one last big party, it means to set an intention.

To Shrove means to write down, as in, to record a commitment to go deeper.

Going deeper is the opportunity that Lent presents to Christians every year.

It seems to me that many people, myself included, give a lot of lip service to going deeper.

Given the choice, I don't think I'd ever say, "No, I think I'll stay shallow. Superficiality is working for me."

And yet going deeper always means discomfort and even pain.

There may be moments of satisfaction along the way, but when we say go deeper, we really mean go where you haven't gone before, and probably don't really want to go.

That has been my experience with ministry. While a lot of it is familiar territory, I have this nagging sense that the most important place to go is into the unknown.

Left entirely to my own devices, I would probably never willingly choose to go down such a path, a path of disorientation, insecurity, and vulnerability.

IV.

Who knows what those three poor disciples thought they were getting into when they went up the mountain with Jesus?

Maybe they were looking forward to a wonderful mountaintop experience, like the woman who fell in love with the idea of going on a 7-day silent retreat.

It was not hard for her to romanticize the idea of seven days of peace and quiet.

But by the end of day one, thoughts she had long suppressed were demanding to be heard.

By day two, the voices of her thoughts were so loud and ugly she almost gave up and went home.

By day three she was exhausted, depressed, and slept most of the time.

Day four was a blur with an uncomfortable emptiness settling over her.

Day five seemed like more of the same, but she started noticing things she had not noticed before – the play of light on shadow through the leaves of the tree outside her room, the whistle of wind through a crack in her window, the freckles on the back of her hand.

Day six there was peace, but not the peace she had expected to find. It was not the peace of an exciting discovery of well-being, but the peace that comes with letting go of expectations and being willing, no, being forced, to live in the present moment.

On day seven, she started to anticipate going home.

Some of the voices crept back in, a to-do list started to form.

These things didn't disappear altogether, but she held onto these more lightly now.

What happened on that retreat was not what she had expected to happen, and she would not have chosen to go had she knew the pain and discomfort that would come.

And yet, she went home with a sense of gratitude for growth that only comes from carrying one's cross – the suffering in one's life we'd usually rather ignore.

The disciples were not prepared for what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration.

When Jesus glowed like halogen, and his clothes shone like sunshine on the water, and a phosphorescent cloud descended upon them they were startled and amazed.

But it wasn't until they heard the voice that their amazement turned to fear.

"This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am smitten. Listen to him."

At those words, the disciples fell face-first on the ground.

Jesus had heard that voice once before, at his Baptism, but for the disciples this was the first time, and it was terrifying.

Sometimes I wonder whether our baptism is a kind of inoculation against our overwhelming fear at the sound of God's voice.

If we can hear God's voice calling us "beloved" at our baptism, then perhaps we're less likely to run away later on when God speaks to us.

The disciples hadn't received their shots, so the dis-ease hit them all at once.

I wonder what they were thinking, lying there on the ground, covering their heads.
I imagine Peter hoping it would all stop, wondering what he got himself into.
With that voice, that terrifying voice ringing in his ears, I wonder if it was in that moment that Peter realized, "We Cannot Keep God Safe."

God will not be contained in a building or a bureaucracy.
We cannot keep God safe.
God will not be equated with a philosophy, even the best one.
We cannot keep God safe.
God does not live or die based on how many "followers" there are.
We cannot keep God safe.
God's existence does not depend upon our proofs. We cannot keep God safe.
God cannot be protected from the violence and suffering of the world.
God cannot be sheltered against the folly of humanity.
God cannot be exempted from the cross.
It's too late for that. God chose otherwise. We cannot keep God safe.

Our God is not a safe God,
not an aloof God,
not a cut and run God,
but a full-fleshed, completely committed,
sleeves rolled up, covenanted God with skin on, God with calloused hands and feet,
God with a sparkle in the eye, or is it a tear,
God who has determined to be with and for humanity through thick and thin,
even until the end of days.
Our God is not a safe God, which is why real encounters with God can be terrifying.
After all, who would choose a Messiah with a death wish over one with a plan to
make Israel great again?
Who would choose to pick up their cross when a gun feels so much better?
Who would choose to give away more of their time and money?
Who would choose to go through recovery?
Who would choose to give marriage counseling another go?
Who would move their entire life from Colorado Springs to Sebastopol?
Who would protest every week amidst the shouts of angry people?
Who would *willingly* go on a silent retreat for seven days?
Who in the world would do those things? People who don't know any better.
And sometimes it's better not to know any better, because that's where God can
really do some work, leading us where we would not otherwise go.
Amen.