



“The Times, They Are A-Changin’!”

Pastor Lew Hinshaw

March 12, 2017

Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 17:1-9

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I[a] will make three dwellings[b] here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved;[c] with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Sermon:

This morning my goal is to ponder with you, two startling and momentous memes from this intriguing text in the Gospel of Matthew. The first is this: Jesus was transfigured in the presence of Peter, James and John. Or in more contemporary terms: Jesus morphed. The second is this: This Jesus is my Son, the Beloved; upon him, my favor rests. [Repeat.] Please underscore or write them down. Meditate on them for a few days. I invite each of us to look deeply into this story, and into our own heart, in our search for wisdom and guidance. My hope is that you will sense a Word of God to our world in this present time, and a positive message to us Christians, during this Lenten season. OK?

I begin by quoting some words from a 20th-21st century prophet, Bob Dylan.

“Come gather ‘round people, wherever you roam,
and admit that the waters around you have grown.
And accept it that soon you’ll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you is worth savin’
Then you better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone.
For the times . . . they are a-changin’.” [1964]

This song was first recorded in 1964. It is now the year 2017 C.E. The times haven’t stopped changin’ for the past 53 years and they are still a-changin’! Earth’s climate is changing. Our nation and its politics are changin’. The church at every level is changin’. Christianity itself is changin’. As a sign of the times, Episcopal Bishop the Rev. John Shelby Spong published a book in 1998 with the title Why Christianity Must Change or Die. Change itself, as we know, is the only constant. And right now the change we experience is so fast, so pervasive, so personal. It’s no longer a question of “if,” but a question of “what” and “how” we respond.

When Jesus summoned his three friends to come with him up the mountain, they had no idea what lay ahead. To this point in Matthew’s account, tagging along behind Jesus hadn’t been all that easy. It was about to get even tougher. The Gospel tells us while they stood waiting, Jesus morphed. His body was changed into burning sunlit brilliance and he was clothed in eye-popping dazzling white light. I just about wore out my Roget’s Thesaurus looking for adjectives other than “awesome”! I mean . . . it’s beyond description. Theologically: Jesus in his full humanity . . . Christ in his glory. As John himself recalled it, writing the beginning of his own Gospel, “. . . we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son.” [1:14] Peter, James and John were overcome by this vision of the pure and absolute perfection of Jesus . . . a soul-shattering, spirit-deepening, mountain-top experience.

Just reading about it, of course, leaves us kinda . . . what . . . puzzled, envious, yadda-yadda-yadda? Yeah, I know, in one sense you had to be there. But sit and soak in this text for a moment. . . . In another sense, it suggests something even greater than a personal mountain-top experience, something the human heart thirsts for, something you and I know is right and good and true, down in our very bones. And it is this: Jesus in his full human nature is [as he often called himself] the Son of Man . . . which means he stands for humankind, he represents the entire human family. So the Transfiguration Story opens to us this mind-bending, heart-warming truth: the body of Christ is not just the body of Jesus of Nazareth. The body of Christ is the human race, *all* peoples, *all* nations, *all* religions . . .

everyone . . . no left-outs, no left-behinds, no marginalized, no untouchables, no exceptions. **Everyone.** And THIS is the body God morphing into its fullness.

Yeah, right! No, really! I believe this is God's goal. I believe this will happen. The morph on Matthew's mountain was quite a sight. No doubt about that. But the morph that's coming? What a sight THAT will be!

But . . . but, but, but . . . we humans . . . as individuals and as a family . . . don't seem to want to go there, do we? We don't want to be changed into one family. We are too invested emotionally [it feels good] and economically [we make more money] in clans, and countries and political partisanship, competition, zero-sum games of all kinds . . . it's just so hard to let go. In the presence . . . or prospect . . . of change, even glorious change, our responses tend to mirror those of Peter, James and John. We want to memorialize and monumentalize the past. To mimic a current political meme, some Christians want to make Christianity great again [like it was in the 1950's]. We build cathedrals or mega-churches. We want to put marble replicas of the Ten Commandments in our public buildings. Or we "babble" . . . as Eugene Peterson said of the three disciples in his translation of this story in The Message . . . with religious talk, beliefs, creeds, sermons, all kinds of insider lingo . . . big words like atonement . . . eschatology . . . *transfiguration* 😊. Or we fall in fear, immobilized, frozen in place, unable to grow, learn something new, change our ways. All of this tends to block God's morphing intent and power.

The issue we face is not who's right and who's wrong. The issue is whether we humans can learn to live as one family, can morph into the shape God desires for us all. The issue is whether we are *in* God's way or *on* God's Way. As the Apostle Paul put it: "The present form of this world is passing away." [1 Cor. 7:31] That might just include some present worldly forms of Christianity.

I read a report of an interview with a local Ku Klux Klan leader in a mid-western city. She said, "We don't hate anybody. God says you can't get into heaven with hate in your heart. I don't hate black people. I just think they're not as good as white people. They should stop whining and complaining about how they are treated. But that's not hate."

Perhaps. Whatever. The Transfiguration Story stands strong and clear as a marvelous resource for our efforts to know how to change in a positive, constructive and authentically Christian way.

OK . . . so that's the first meme . . . the body of Christ as humankind is morphing. There is marvelous wisdom for us in that grand vision. We also are in search of guidance. We want

direction for answering the question of *how* to change. And that leads us to the second meme: the transfiguring Jesus is God's Beloved, upon whom God's favor rests.

One current writer [Len Sweet, [Faithquakes](#)] . . . says it's time for Christians to shift from the emphasis on "Here I stand" of Martin Luther 500 years ago. Taking a stand was the absolute right thing for him to do then. He stood up in protest and in resistance to a church power structure failing to spiritually serve its people. He created the Protestant "brand" of Christianity. While the new brand accomplished some needed change, it did so at the cost of tearing the part of the body of Christ known as the Church. And we loyal Protestants have kept right on tearing the body of Christ, known as the church, into smaller and smaller pieces ever since. In the 21st century, we may still legitimately begin with "Here I stand." But we are learning the value of re-branding, the value of adding a new saying, "There we go," the value of being on a journey together, of pulling together instead of pulling apart. The transfigured Jesus shows us the path, the way.

What is it about the Transfigured Jesus, "this" Jesus that makes him an excellent guide to, and on the way, to being one human family? Go back to the story in Matthew for just a moment. In a kind of instant replay of Mt. Sinai . . . the voice of God speaks out of the cloud. But something is different. There are no Cecil B. DeMille fingers of flame laser-writing the commandments onto stone, no imperious voice decreeing "thou shalt" and "thou shall not".

The voice on Matthew's mountain speaks peaceably, intimately, passionately . . . compassionately. This is more like a replay of his baptism . . . "This is my Son, the Beloved. Upon him my favor rests." And the witnesses . . . Peter, James and John? They collapse in fear. Put yourself in their shoes [sandals 😊] for a moment. "If it takes this kind of dazzling perfection to merit God's love and favor," they must have been thinking, "then we don't stand a chance. This life of faith is a dead end. We've been following this guy from Nazareth for nothing. It's all over."

But it wasn't over. With God it is never over. Now we hear the voice of Jesus . . . peaceable, intimate, passionate . . . compassionate . . . "Dear friends. Your fears are groundless. God's favor rests upon you exactly as it rests upon me. I am no more worthy of it than you are. Every human being is God's Beloved. God's love is too lavish to rest upon only one, just me, or upon only a few, just the Jews [we have to add or the Christians]."

Years ago, Charles Schulz cartooned this dialogue between Lucy and Linus.

Lucy: **You** a doctor! **Ha!** That's a big laugh!
You could never be a doctor! You know why?

Because you don't love mankind, that's why!
Linus: I love mankind . . . it's **PEOPLE** I can't stand!!

What the transfigured Jesus tells Peter, James John and us is that, yes indeed, God loves mankind (*sic*)! That's good news. But there's even better news: **God loves mankind by loving people . . . one by one, person by person.**

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus once picked wheat from a field on the Sabbath in order to feed his disciples. The religious leaders criticized him severely for it. He responded by saying, "Something greater than the temple is here." [12:6] Something greater than their religious system was here. And something greater than our religion, our politics, our skin color, our sexual orientation, our socio-economic status, our gender, our age . . . *something greater is here*. All the brands we take upon ourselves or put upon other people, brands that separate human from human, and tear apart the human family, the body of Christ, have been outclassed by something greater: **GOD'S BRAND . . . GOD'S BELOVED!**

God's favor does not turn us into Jesus clones, good little boys and girls, spit spot spic and span practically perfect in every way like Mary Poppins. [How insufferable would that be?] God's favor does something far grander and more important. It makes of us one people, one family, one race. Our differences and uniqueness no longer divide us. Now we celebrate differences as the gifts of God they are. Now the divine favor that rests upon us can be shared with others. **God's brand bonds us**. There is no longer us and them. Now there is only us . . . God's Beloved.

Let us remember the Apostle Paul's words about the body of Christ in First Corinthians [12]. He was talking about the "church" as the body of Christ. But what he said can also be applied to the larger body of Christ. What he said was that no one part is better than any other part and no one part can say of any other part "I have no need of you."

What this means for us is at least this:

The theist part of the body cannot say to the atheist part of the body "I'm better than you. I have no need of you," because the atheist part teaches us to stop believing in our beliefs and start believing in God.

The Christian part of the body cannot say to the Muslim part of the body "I'm better than you. I have no need of you," because the Muslim part teaches us that faith is a way of life instead of a compartment of life.

The friendly part of the body cannot say to its enemies “I am better than you. I have no need of you,” because our enemies challenge us to obey Jesus who said, “Go learn what this means: I desire mercy not sacrifice.”

The heterosexual part of the body cannot say to the Lesbian / Gay / Bi-sexual / Transgender / Queer part of the body “I am better than you. I have no need of you,” because the LGBTQ part teaches us how to be rigorously honest about ourselves and courageously honest about ourselves with others.

We cannot say to the Earth part of the body, “I have no need of you,” because without our Mother the Earth, the web of life itself dies.

This is **our** transfiguration. Let us remember that it is possible, even necessary, to bond with people we don’t like or with whom we disagree. But as *we* morph . . . how dazzling! Oh . . . the beauty of it! Whatever you are, is now part of me. Whatever I am, is part of you. This is what God dreamed about the adam, the living being made of dirt, from the very beginning. In Jesus, God’s dream came true. Jesus passed it to us. Now it’s our turn to pass it on. Check today’s bulletin cover. This is, I believe, a testimonial to this congregation’s determination to be passers of God’s “brand,” the Beloved.

One more word about the change going on around us. That word is RESIST. Some change is worthy of support. Some must be resisted. As people of faith, our spiritual work is to discern and distinguish which is which. The Transfiguration Story, I believe, teaches us the value of bonding as a form of resistance, to the forms of this world that tear the human family into pieces. It is not the only form, but it is a necessary one. To resist by non-violent bonding, matches most closely, the Jesus way of resistance. The morph is happening. E.g., the hospitality of Temple Beth Shalom last weekend . . . met at the door by Rabbi Tamar Malino . . . and fed a delicious meal!

Let me close with another verse from our prophet Bob Dylan [slightly amended!]:

“Come mothers and fathers throughout the land.
And don’t criticize what you don’t understand.
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command.
Your old road is rapidly agin’.
Please get on the new road as fast as you can;
For the times . . . they are a-changin’!”

Amen.