

From The beginning of Advent through Pentecost there are a series of important days on the church calendar that we commemorate every year. In other words, If your 54 years old, like I am, you've probably heard about 54 sermons on things like the story of Christ's birth, and the visits of the shepherds and magi, and the baptism of Jesus and the prophecy of John the Baptist (which we've heard at least three times already this year alone!) These are touchpoints in the story of Jesus, important scenes in his life and ministry that give a framework for our own knowledge of and faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Today is one of those days, being that it is Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration Sunday is one of the more difficult of the touchpoint days on the church calendar for a pastor to preach about because it is literally clouded in mystery.

The story turns on people, places, and things. The people are Jesus and his disciples Peter, James and John—later joined by Moses and Elijah; the place is a mountain top; and the things are blindingly white clothing and a proposed set of tabernacles to be built.

The text is packed with symbolism. It happens 6 days after Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah—and 6 days after Jesus predicted his death and resurrection and rebuked Peter for rebuking him. You might remember that the number 7 in Biblical lore is a number that symbolizes completeness; 6 likewise indicates incompleteness. It also connects the event of the transfiguration of Jesus with creation—the work finished in 6 days but a 7th day needed for sabbath rest in order for creation to be complete.

We're up on a mountaintop, a reminder of Moses and his encounter with God on the mountaintop. We also have Moses appearing and talking with Jesus on this mountaintop.

Elijah is also there, Elijah who along with Moses was lifted into heaven in front of witnesses—foreshadowing Jesus' ascension into heaven later in the story.

And we are told that as he stands there talking to Moses and Elijah his clothes become dazzlingly white, an unearthly, blinding white, reminding us of the fact that after Moses met with God he had to wear a veil because his face was so radiantly bright, and again reminding us of the young man in white who shows up at Jesus' tomb, who announces the resurrection to the women.

Last but not least a voice announces that Jesus is the Son, a voice from a cloud that tells the disciples to 'listen' to Jesus, reminding us of Jesus' baptism and a voice calling him the Son.

So it isn't overstating things to say that there's a lot going on here.

It doesn't help that we've jumped from the beginning of Jesus ministry to a place much further along the way toward Jerusalem. In fact this is the middle of the book of Mark, the tipping point in a way. Up to this point there's been a lot of healing and driving out of demons; after this it's downhill all the way (so to speak.) From here on Jesus will move step by step toward the cross-- and toward the resurrection.

So while we're here let's pause a moment and ponder this event. What's going on here? And why do we care—what meaning does all of this have for us? (And why does Peter suggest building tabernacles in this place?)

Most end of time theology is built on a world view that comes out of the time in which the gospel of Mark was written. In this view there is the present time-- part of the old age or old creation-- in which Satan, demons, idolatry, disobedience, injustice, violence, exploitation, sickness, rivalry with the natural world, and death are the order of the day. These are what are thought of "worldly powers" and

not only Jesus but Paul talk about them as the old way. The Messiah was thought to be someone who would bring in the new heaven and new earth—a new age, a new creation in which God would reign, true worship, justice, obedience, peace, empathy, a compatibility between humans and nature, and life will prevail. In this view there will be at some point a clash between the old and new, a violent replacement of the old by the new. This is what is called by theologians ‘replacement eschatology’ and is the traditional way of understanding the end times. You know, the image of Jesus coming on a cloud to sweep away the evil and take home the good?

Our passage today, the story of the transfiguration, hints at another way of looking at this transition between the old and new creations. In this way Jesus is the announcing agent of the new creation and his existence ushers in a transitional age—the age in which we’re still living. The age that will lead into the new age, the new reign of God. The age in which the powers of *this* world are exposed and are incapacitated by the inbreaking of the new creation. In this understanding the whiteness of Jesus’ clothing and the appearance of Moses and Elijah are less mysterious—they become a glimpse of what the new creation will look like. Bright and shiny as a new penny, as my grandmother used to say. Complete and whole so that all of the elements of the new age shine through. Jesus appears as an image of the ‘new life’ surrounded by the old world and he stands in the crossroads between them.

No wonder Peter wants to stay here. Here, he thinks, is the new creation, the new life that everyone is longing for, a chance to escape the darkness and danger of the old age. Let’s just build a temple and stay in this moment forever!

Unfortunately this isn’t the new creation in its fullest manifestation, only a taste of what will come. A cloud descends, Jesus is hailed as God’s Son, and then Moses and Elijah and the white clothes are gone and it’s back to normal time. And we continue with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Back toward betrayal and arrest and crucifixion and death.

And resurrection.

Just 6 days before this scene Jesus has asked the disciples “who do you say I am” and Peter has called him the Messiah. Just 6 days before Jesus has predicted that the Messiah must suffer and die, and on the third day be raised. Only Peter apparently didn’t hear that last part because he fixates on the suffering and death and rebukes Jesus. But Jesus knows the truth: it isn’t his death that matters, it is his new life that matters. Just as his whitened clothes matter and his baptism by John with its special recognition by the Spirit matters. These are thin places in the life of Jesus, thin places in which his true identity show, thin places in which the new creation, for just a moment, shines through. It isn’t the suffering and death that make Jesus a savior, it is the new life, the evidence that the powers of the world could not defeat him, that makes Jesus a savior.

When we are baptized into Jesus we are baptized into that new life. We become a part of the new creation and we become witnesses to that new creation. Our job becomes to tell people ‘things can be better than this!’ and to show them how. How injustices can be righted. How power that relies on violence doesn’t have to have a stranglehold on humanity and nature. How using people and being used by others is destructive but working together for the common good is constructive.

Part of our transformation involves leaving ourselves behind and doing what is right for the new creation. We don’t bring in the new creation ourselves, God does that; but we must live as new beings and take on new priorities in our lives. We make authentic worship a priority, asking ourselves ‘is what we’re doing in worship pleasing to God? Does it bring glory to God and reflect the new creation?’ We make mission, as building relationships, a priority, again asking ‘is this pleasing to God? Does it reflect the new creation?’ We make fellowship a priority, fellowship as not just Christian

friendship but as 'building the body of Christ' and again we ask 'does our part of the body please God? Does our part of the body demonstrate how it is to be in the new creation?' Every step of the way, everything we do we must ask ourselves these questions, we must know how it is we are being witnesses to the new age that was ushered in by Christ but yet to be fully realized. Not because we're trying to earn God's love and forgiveness for when we fall short—because we will and do fall short—but because we know that falling short doesn't bring punishment but loving redirection by a God whose very nature is to love.

The great thing about this? It means that it isn't about us. It isn't about how bad we are or how good we are but that we are people of God in Jesus Christ.

You might have heard some talk or read in the newsletter that the session is doing some discernment work regarding the future of our ministry here at COF. All over the country and in many parts of the world churches are having this same discussion: what is our purpose? Why are we here? Are we making a difference? Our membership is declining, we're aging and our building is aging and we are afraid of the future. WE may feel that we're facing our own mortality by facing the possible mortality of our church structure or building or any part of our church experience.

But you know what? Our passage today is very good news for us. It is very good news because it says that it isn't where we worship and do ministry that matters so much but the authenticity of our worship and the trustworthiness of our message that matters. Jesus didn't want to stay on the mountain in a tabernacle, Jesus wanted to go down the mountain to the people who needed him, because he came to be with the people where they were. What matters is the genuineness of our intentions towards those to whom we minister—can they trust that we want what's best for all of us? What's important is the realness of our faith in Christ as God's Son—do we live what we say we believe, to the best of our ability? And we don't do these things for God *per se*, but to demonstrate to others what it is to be a Christ-follower, what it is to be a part of the new creation. Not for fame, not for position, not for political power, not because we want others to think we're better than we are ('cause we're not, we are still human, after all) but to show what is possible, what is coming, why we choose to live as people of the way of Christ.

Maybe we don't bring in the new creation; but as Jesus gave his disciples a peek at what was to come we too can give others a peek at what it will mean when the new creation arrives: it will be bright as a new penny, a world that will be fair for everyone, kind to everyone, alive in the love and grace of God. Amen.