

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Matthew 17:1-9 The Transfiguration

A Genuine Story to Tell

There're great special effects in our readings today. First of all, in the Old Testament story from Exodus, when Moses goes up on the mountain top, "the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel." Can you imagine witnessing that!? What a sight! To see the appearance of the Lord like a devouring fire covering the whole top of the mountain. Moses saw a burning bush, and he was impressed. When he was on the mountain top, the people saw an entire burning mountain. That would truly make a lasting impression on you, wouldn't it?

Then in the Gospel today, we have the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain in front of Peter, James, and John. The Epistle is Peter talking first hand of this experience when he heard the voice from what he calls the "Majestic Glory". That conjures up an image, doesn't it? The Majestic Glory. In Greek the word is: *megaleiotētos*. An impressive word, huh? It's sometimes translated: magnificence. So Peter, James, and John see Jesus transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. And this is way before OxiClean. That's not all. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. Peter suggests that they make three dwellings for them to stay on the mountain. And then a bright cloud overshadowed them. This is what Peter called *megaleiotētos*... God's Majestic Glory... God's Magnificence! I wonder what it looked like from the foot of the mountain. Did it look like a devouring fire, like when Moses met God on the mountain? Are we getting to see what Moses saw back then, from inside the cloud and fire? Finally, from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Wow! Like I said, good special effects today, right? You'd think that after an experience like this transfiguration, Peter would never forget it, wouldn't you? Surely this transformed his life, just like the sight of the devouring fire must have transformed the people of Israel when they saw it. But remember that while Moses was on top of the mountain, the people quickly turned to a golden calf, an idol. They abandoned the God who had set them free from slavery in Egypt, who had divided the waters of the Red Sea, who had led them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and who had transformed the top of the mountain where Moses had gone to meet with him into a blazing inferno. After all of that, they were still not faithful to God. And Peter... remember what happened to him. He was granted this amazing sight, to see Jesus transfigured before him, to see him talking with Moses and Elijah, with the Law and the Prophets, and to encounter the *megaleiotētos* of God, and to hear God's voice proclaiming Jesus his beloved son, and still at the critical moment, when Peter had the opportunity to stand up and proclaim that he was with Jesus, he faltered. His courage failed him. His faith failed him. After all that, Peter still denied Jesus... three times!

So what's the point? Why would God bother with all the flashing fire, and cloud, and dramatic voice? I mean, you can understand why we humans would need something like that. We're pretty concrete. We need a reason to believe. We, like Thomas, want to see the wounds in Jesus' hands and side. We want to put our hands on them. We want some kind of proof. But Peter and the people of Israel show us that even with an amazing experience, we humans are prone to doubt, to forget the certainty of a single moment of clarity. I'm afraid the vision fades a little with every step down the mountain back to our normal life. So why bother?

I suppose that God can't help himself. My suspicion is that when we have an intense experience of the divine, whether it comes with some sort of impressive visual manifestation or

not, it is less about God trying to prove something to us, and more about God tickling us. You know, how people like to tickle babies, just to get a reaction out of them. You can't help yourself when you're face to face with a baby. Ya gotta tickle it. It's so much fun seeing how the baby reacts. It giggles. It squeals. It smiles at you. It *goo-goo*s at you. It's a moment of pure joy—for the baby and for the one tickling it. My hunch is that it's like that for God. God can't help himself. He gets so much joy from our joy when we meet him in these rare moments of religious ecstasy, when we feel like our world has been turned upside down and we can't even imagine a time without that comforting warm feeling that says, "God is real; and God is right here with me." But of course, two minutes after you tickle a baby, it could be crying its head off. Life is like that.

Even if our encounters of God, as intense and emotional as they may be, don't instantly transform us into a saint with perfect faith, they still work on us. Just as the baby is learning something about social interaction, learning something about human love, even though a single tickle is not a lesson it will remember, we learn something about our relationship with God from these experiences, don't we? We learn something about ourselves, about our faith, even about the cost of discipleship. Every time we turn our face toward God, we get a playful tickle, or a gentle caress, sometimes even a hard slap. All of these experiences, the dramatic and the mundane, work together to form our relationship with God.

So here's a question for you. How do we tell the story? Peter, in the Epistle today, tells the story of his experience with God, and God's Son, on that mountain years after it happened. How can we find the words for something for which there are no words? How do we communicate our faith, our experience of the divine? How do we engage people who don't have a faith? How about millennials, the younger generation that isn't in the Church? Do you think

they need special effects? Or are they, like so many of us today, too jaded to be impressed with special effects? We've peeked behind the curtain, haven't we? Do you suppose they just want some authentic, genuine experience of God in their lives, without a lot of drama? How do we offer that? At what point does the attempt to facilitate a religious experience in another become just manipulation?

I know. This is hard stuff. It's hard enough just trying to figure out God in your own life without trying to figure out how to invite others into the mix. We struggle with this stuff, don't we? I get the feeling God really wants us to figure it out, or at least keep struggling with it. It's a big responsibility. Maybe our own struggle is the place to start. Years later, Peter is still telling the same story because it was a life changing experience, and it continues to be. How has God touched your life? What amazing or mundane stories do you have to tell? The simple act of witnessing, person to person, simply relating a personal story, the way you talk to people every day of your life, that's how the Gospel has been spread from the beginning. That was most people's experience of Jesus, as a story teller. No special effects necessary. No special talent required.

We will struggle for the rest of our lives to figure out what our faith is all about. We will always be balanced between our belief and our unbelief. God's not waiting for us to figure it out. God wants us the way we are, today. Being a disciple of Jesus means being a witness, a story teller. "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.'" These guys couldn't wait to tell the story of what they had seen, and they told it for years afterward. That's the thing about a good story, you just can't keep it to yourself.

Amen.