

“Special Effects”

Homily Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
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When some colleagues and I were discussing the transfiguration last week, one person got really hung up on Moses’ presence in the narrative. Because Elijah had been whisked off in a chariot, rather than experiencing a normal human death and burial, his ability to return to earth for this magical moment made some sense. But Moses, who famously died just before reaching the Promised Land with his people, he was another matter altogether. “Why is he here?” my colleague kept asking. I could offer up plenty of symbolic reasons for Moses to be part of this story, but I have to admit I was stumped by the literal side of the question. Well, why not? If Elijah could escape death by hitching a chariot ride to heaven, why *couldn’t* Moses get a day pass out of Sheol to join Jesus on a mountain top? Why suspend disbelief just *a little bit*?

From there our questions took on lives of their own. Come to think of it, without photographs, how would Jesus’ disciples even have been able to recognize Elijah or Moses? Were they wearing those “Hello, my name is” badges? And what were they talking to Jesus about anyway? Were they catching up? As in, “Hey, Jesus, we haven’t seen you since the incarnation. How’s it going down here?” ...Or were they doing official business? Was there something that Elijah and Moses knew, that Jesus really needed to know so they had to run down to earth and tell him right away? Was it a kind of a savior-to-savior talk? Or a group huddle contrived to impress Peter, James, and John? I mean, it’s not just that Moses and Elijah *appeared with* Jesus, but that Jesus actually *knew* them. Maybe Jesus was saying to Moses, “Are they looking? Are they looking? OK, pretend you’re talking to me like we’re old pals and I just said something really funny.”

And Elijah and Moses, laughing loudly, slap Jesus on the back, give him a “high five” and a playful punch in the shoulder. ...Or maybe they were complimenting him: “Jesus, your clothes are whiter than anyone on earth could ever bleach them. What *is* your laundry secret?”

The possibilities are endless.

But, all kidding aside, what happened next is kind of unbelievable. Here we have Moses and Elijah, two great historical figures together, representing the Law and the Prophets, appearing out of nowhere and talking to Jesus, ...and *then Peter, well, Peter interrupts them!* Can we even begin to imagine what kind of nerve *that* took? The text tells us that he did *not know what to say*, for they were *terrified* So, knowing that he didn’t know what to say, he spoke. Truly, what could *Peter* have possibly added to a conversation between Elijah, Moses and Jesus? Then again, nerves do funny things sometimes. Perhaps Peter was extremely extroverted and simply *had* to talk out loud in order to think things through. And so here he’s like, “Uh excuse me, Jesus... It’s really good to be here with all of you. How about if we make a dwelling for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah? Then you can sit down, relax, put your feet up, and be a little bit more comfortable while you’re talking.” ...Huh?

While Peter’s brilliant idea doesn’t seem to have elicited a response from Jesus, the two prophets, or the other two disciples, we do hear from God. In fact, God interrupts before Peter has even finished speaking. Whether or not this was in direct response to Peter’s babbling interruption, we don’t know. But just then a cloud overshadowed them and a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” ...And that’s it. That’s the end of the transfiguration. The cloud cleared away. Elijah and Moses are gone, and they head down the mountain with Jesus.

Like the ultimate non-sequitur dream sequence, the appearance of Moses and Elijah seems so out of place, as does this moment of transfiguring. There is nothing like it in the rest of the text.

It is not referred to and seems to have no effect on the narrative. *Beside Jesus glowing for a moment, what did the transfiguration actually transfigure? What got transformed?*

...And yet, despite all these questions, *some* version of this story appears in *all four gospels*.

It would seem that Peter, James, and John followed instructions and told no one about their experience until after Jesus' resurrection. But, regardless, it made an impression.

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Throughout the week I struggled to come up with a modern parallel to this narrative, scrounged around in my own life, the news, literature, you name it. And I came up more than a little short.

I certainly didn't want to demean the transfiguration with an unworthy example--a tall tale or a lame story that paled in comparison. It left me feeling like maybe I couldn't really relate to this event or any of its characters. Then I had to remind myself how Jesus, who has been

characterized by some as an introvert like me, occasionally stepped away from the crowds to

pray, be still, and recharge his battery. That Moses had tried to duck out of his call from God by

making excuses, just like I had once done. That Elijah had run scared when Queen Jezebel's forces were after him, hiding under a tree and asking God to spare him by taking his life right

then and there. That, like Peter, I have been known to stick my foot in my mouth from time to

time or float a crazy idea or try to hold on a little too tightly to a special relationship or a moment

in time. ...Common denominators of our shared humanity.

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In the Ancient Near East, mountains, also called *high places*, were considered holy. Like the

temple, they were sacred places to encounter God. In Celtic spirituality, they would be referred

to as "thin places." Here the divide between heaven and earth, divine and human, ancient and

modern, living and dead is *blurry*. The veil is thin. As *profound* and *transformative* as a pilgrimage to a thin place can be, ultimately, *we don't live there*. We go home to our day to day lives renewed on the inside and, if we're lucky, glowing on the outside. Yet if, after we descend the mountain, we continue to stay open and faithful to the voice of God in our lives, the ongoing narrative *will* be affected. God's presence will be felt throughout the trials and challenges of our Lenten seasons, not just sustaining us personally, but granting extra strength and courage to follow through on the things God has called us to do in this lifetime. Sharing God's light broadly, rather than holding it tightly to ourselves. For not only did Peter, James, and John *make it through* Holy Week to experience Jesus' resurrection, ...they went on to spread Christ's light and the gospel's healing word...and eventually died the deaths of martyrs.

I'd like to close by sharing a modern, local example of the impact faith on the actions of our Christian witness: Last week there was an accident near Lewiston in which a high school girl rear ended a van with an Amish family on the way to doctor appointments. Two of the women were pregnant and underwent c sections at the hospital. One child survived. The other did not. Assume that you're one of the surviving family members. How would you respond?

Would you:

- a) insist that the individual responsible be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law;
- b) call the family who caused the accident and cuss them out;
- c) call the prosecutor and insist that there be no charges brought;
- d) call the family who caused the accident and tell them that you forgive them, bear them no ill will and pray with them for healing;
- e) call the individual who caused the accident each day to make sure that she is doing well, healing mentally and spiritually;

f) call the individual and her family and have your family sing a song of healing love, forgiveness and assurance that all which happens is God's will;

g) offer to call the school, it's principal and her teachers to make sure that nothing upsetting, no teasing, no bullying will occur?

In the instance of the young driver, a member of the Lewiston UCC church, the family who was terribly injured has done "c" through "g".

May we too carry Christ's light off of Epiphany's sacred mountain and into the plains of Lent.

Amen.