

Last Epiphany, Year A

- We all have stories in Scripture that speak to us, that move us deeply
- Passages that we might even have memorized, or at least that we know the gist of well enough that we sort of carry them around with us, use them as a frame of reference for our thinking about the faith
- Maybe you hear me say that and you're thinking of your favorite Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd..." or "I lift up my eyes to the hills..."
- Or maybe some of those comfortable words, such as a passage like John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world..." or "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden..."
- But for most of us, I'd venture a guess that the story we just heard, the story of the Transfiguration, does not hold such a central place in most of our hearts
- It's a difficult story to empathize with, I think
- It's hard to put ourselves in the disciples' shoes, hard to make out what the point of this story is, especially since so often I've heard preachers talk about what this story is not
- Do you know what I mean?
- So often, the sermons I've heard on the Transfiguration are not exactly sympathetic toward the disciples who were there, Peter and James and John
- Where I come from in the south you get a whole lot of "Well, bless their hearts..."
- And as anyone from the south can tell you, there aren't many harsher things you can say about someone than "Bless their heart..."
- The disciples miss the point of the Transfiguration, we're told – they just don't get it
- Peter says they should build three houses, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus himself
- And we laugh these days at Peter, poor misguided Peter, how on earth could he think that was what he should do
- We laugh despite the fact that if you go to Mount Tabor, that's exactly what we've done – build the Church of the Transfiguration, a massive Church with a chapel on each side, one to Moses, and one to Elijah
- We laugh knowing how much we love to commemorate events – with memorials and historical markers and monuments
- This is what we humans do, we commemorate things – just ask Gettysburg or Washington DC or historic Route 66 or the Lewis and Clark Trail
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- But still, maybe we hear that message so often – that the disciples missed the point – that we forget what the point they missed even was
- Surely the point of the Transfiguration wasn't just that Jesus' face was glowing, dazzlingly bright, right? Surely it wasn't just that Moses and Elijah appeared next to him, symbolizing how Jesus was the culmination, the fulfillment, of the Law and the Prophets
- That's certainly part of the meaning of that vision – but thankfully, we have some words to go along with it
- Important words
- Booming words
- Words spoken by God himself
- And those words say three things – three things that I think the disciples were meant to keep in mind
- Three things I think we're meant to keep in mind
- Three things important enough to make this one of those passages that maybe we should hold onto, keep in our back pocket, because they aren't too shabby a summary of what our lives in Christ ought to entail
- The first thing is said from a cloud, one that overshadows the disciples even as Peter is talking, and the voice of God booms down from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"
- Listen to him
- The first thing we're asked to do is to listen
- I think that's a fairly important starting point – listening... discernment
- Even in the English language, the word 'obey' comes from the word 'to hear' or 'to listen'
- If we're going to obey Christ, to obey God, then we first have to listen, to try to hear God's voice speaking to us, whether it's in a whirlwind or a fire or a still small voice, or in a moment of the unmistakable glory shining around the face of God's only Son
- We don't get any of that, can't hear any word from God if we aren't listening
- So that's step one
- And it isn't an easy step – in fact, when the disciples heard that, we're told, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear
- Which is instructional for us, too: sometimes God's voice can be terrifying
- And that makes steps two and three pretty important, too – those steps are both uttered in the same breath by Jesus, when he comes and touches them, and says, "Get up and do not

be afraid.”

- Get up, and do not be afraid
- That first part seems innocuous the way the NRSV has translated it: “Get up”
- I want to offer you a few other ways that we can translate it, that word that if you look in the Greek you will find from the root egeiro: Arise
- Wake up
- Be raised up
- This is the same verb Jesus uses when he talks to a man paralyzed and tells him his sins are forgiven before telling him, “Stand up and walk” and making him whole
- The same verb Jesus uses when he tells his disciples “raise the dead”
- The same verb an angel uses to tell a group of women outside an empty tomb, “He is not here, he is risen.”
- Be raised up, Jesus tells us – get up, wake up, and embrace Resurrection, embrace the new life that awaits you when you let go of all the things that we think we need to cling to so tightly and instead embrace the only thing that gives life, and gives it abundantly – the Resurrection that is promised in Christ
- Allow God to raise us up from earthly things to heavenly things, allow God to lift us up and dust us off
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- And last, but by no means least, “Do not be afraid.”
- God’s voice can be scary, can be frightening, intimidating – God’s call isn’t always something we feel comfortable answering
- Resurrection is terrifying, if we’re honest, because it only lies on the other side of death – we must die before we are raised to the new life of Resurrection
- The grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die before it is able to bear much fruit
- And dying, even dying to sin or to our own selfish desires, means giving up so much
- So Jesus tells us the same thing the angels of the Lord tell people all throughout Scripture: “Do not be afraid” “Fear not”
- In other words, God knows that following him can be scary – if he didn’t, it’s hard to imagine why he would keep telling people not to be afraid
- But God’s assurance is that we do not need to fear
- God’s got us, and even if we have to let go of some things we need not fear because the Lord God of all creation is with us

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- So that's it, really
- The message of the Transfiguration
- The foolproof three step plan for today
- "Listen to him"
- "Be raised up."
- "Do not be afraid."