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*Transfiguration of our Lord*

*February 19, 2023*

*Exodus 24:12-18; Ps. 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9*

I'm going to take a bit of personal privilege today to say a few words about the upcoming potential transition at CLC, and how I see my own journey and the journey of Christ Lutheran Church reflected in the movement of today's gospel story.

But first and most importantly, the story. The last few Sundays our gospel readings have been from Matthew chapter 5, but today, Transfiguration Sunday, we skip all the way to chapter 17. What's happened in the intervening chapters is significant – Jesus finishes the Sermon on the Mount, heals and cleanses many people, stills a storm, teaches his disciples and sends them out, tells several parables, walks on water, feeds 4,000 people (in Matthew it's only 4,000, not 5,000), and, in just a few verses before the ones we heard today, Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 16 that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Jesus tells them he's going to leave them. At that point Peter begins to rebuke Jesus saying "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!"

And then 6 days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him up a high mountain where he is transfigured before them. It makes total sense, doesn't it, that just days after Peter hears Jesus say he's going to be killed that Peter wants to make three dwellings to stay right there, with Jesus, with Moses, with Elijah, forever. It is good for us to be here, just like this, Peter says. He can't bear the thought of Jesus leaving, of things changing, of life being different than what he's gotten used to with Jesus.

I am so grateful for these kinds of stories in the Bible, because they are so human. Peter is so darn human, just like us. When things are going well, or when we fear the future, we want to hold on to what we have and what we know and not let go. We like stability, we like knowing what to expect every day – including every Sunday at church – and it's hard when things change, especially as they have since Covid.

And honestly, it's the same with every church. This week we hosted the Executive Committees from 8 of the 10 Whatcom County ELCA churches/ministries and heard from every single church that things are not the same since Covid. Every church is dealing with change and loss of members, and, as we know, the numbers of those in this country who affiliate with Christianity or *any* religion is on the decline.

At our gathering of the Executive Committees we talked about how the church has gone through a reformation every 500 years since its inception, and here we are, at the 500-year mark, going through yet another major Reformation of the church. We don't like change, and yet we're on the hinge of an every-500-year change. And, as nearly every Christian under 30 will tell you, the church of the future cannot look like the church of the past or they will not come back or will not come at all. You'll likely be hearing more about that in the adult education class today with Lauren and Ashley.

Those of us who have been part of the church a long time might want to hold on to what we know and what's comfortable – you might even want to hold on to your pastor – but staying where things are always the same and where we know exactly what to expect is not possible, and, according to this gospel story, not even where Jesus wants us to stay.

In each of the transfiguration stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, after Peter asks to stay right where they are, Jesus instead tells Peter, James, and John, basically his own Executive Committee, to get up and go back down the mountain. Jesus knows it's not possible to stay on a literal or figurative mountaintop where things will always remain the same, and he accompanies them down the mountain where the 4 of them will hold on to the vision they experienced there until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.

I wonder if you can picture a bell curve in your mind. Most of us like to live our lives at the top of a bell curve – not too much to one end or the other, for pretty much everything. We like being right in the middle, where things are known and comfortable and, even if we have frustrations, we know what to expect. What's interesting to me is that that's not where Jesus lived. Jesus was mostly on the margins of how life usually unfolded. Jesus was often found with the oppressed and outcast, on the margins of the bell curve, and that's where Jesus taught his disciples, and taught us, to go.

Jesus teaches us to go down the mountaintop, to come down from the top of the bell curve, to where things are not always comfortable or what we can expect, but to the places Jesus will be.

It's kind of like the movement of our liturgy – the pinnacle of the worship service is communion – the top of the bell curve. We've gathered together, heard the good news, we are fed at the meal, and then we are sent out to serve.

We can't just stay around the communion table - that's not what we're made for. We're made for the sending – we're made for dispersing back into the world to do the work of Jesus on the margins of the bell curve.

But here's the thing – even though we're not made for staying at the top of the bell curve, on the top of the mountain, Jesus accompanies us as we make our way down. In each of the stories of the transfiguration, Jesus went back down the mountain with Peter, James, and John. He didn't abandon them, in fact he led them when they went to the margins themselves. He was with them in the change.

And, there was something else Jesus did when he told the disciples to go back down the mountain. From verse 7 of our gospel: Jesus touched them, and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." Jesus touched them like he touches us in communion, and promised them that they would get through the change, that they would get through hard news all would be well.

If I am called to a new congregation we will both making a leap onto new ground, like the picture on the front cover of the bulletin today. But the promise of Jesus is that he will be with us in the gap, with us as we face change, with us when things are not as we expect. And Jesus bathes us in the words, "Do not be afraid, do not be afraid."

This week we're going to gather together on Wednesday, receive ash on our foreheads, and be told, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Even we are a bell curve. We are created by God who breathed life into dust, we live as holy dust, and then we return to God as dust. The mark of the cross on our brow at baptism begins that bell curve of a journey that ends in the completion of our baptismal journey, as Pastor Bobbi Virta's did this week. And yet Jesus goes before us in death and resurrection, to assure us that we do not need to be afraid, even about the end of our lives.

My dear friends in Christ, may you know and trust that Jesus travels with us down the mountain, that Jesus will be with us in all the changes that lie ahead, that Jesus is already ahead of us on the way, and we do not need to be afraid. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Choose hymns