

TransFORMed
Matthew 17:1 – 8, 9 – 13, 14 – 21
February 11, 2018 (Transfiguration)

Like a lot of people, I was celebrating the Eagles' Super Bowl victory last Sunday. Our kids stayed up and watched with us, and at the end, we were all cheering and singing the Eagles' fight song, and Jen pulled out the sparkling grape juice for a toast. Then after the kids went to bed, we stayed up *way* too late watching news coverage of the game and the celebration downtown. It was this great moment that we just didn't want to end.

When I woke up the next morning, I was reading interviews and news reports online, everything I could find. And I came across an article that said, "Las Vegas has released the odds for *next year's* Super Bowl." I'm thinking, "The game just ended *eight hours* ago, and we're already talking about *next year's* Super Bowl!" Then I saw a press conference with Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady, where reporters were asking him, "Are you going to play again next year? Are you thinking about retiring?" And he's saying, "Guys, the game *just ended*, and I'm just trying to process what happened." Then reporters were asking Eagles' coach Doug Pederson, "What are you going to do at quarterback next year, with both Carson Wentz *and* Nick Foles coming back? Are you going to trade Foles? Will there be a quarterback controversy?" And Doug Pederson is saying, "We just won the *Super Bowl*, and I just want to take a little while to enjoy this before I start worrying about next year." But then I saw an article that said, "Eagles front office already looking ahead to next year."

I'm seeing all of this and thinking, "We just experienced one of the greatest moments in Philadelphia sports history, this incredibly fun, exciting time, and we can't even let people *enjoy* it and bask in the glory. We're already moving on to the *next* thing." But at the same time, I understand it. Because while the Eagles and the Patriots were focused on the Super Bowl, there

were 30 other teams already working on next year. They have to start scouting college players and free agents, working on contracts, figuring out which players are going to be back next year and which ones aren't. As great as this moment was for them, there is a lot of work to do to get ready for next year. They can't stay in this moment forever, because they have a *job* to do.

Jesus took three of his disciples – Peter, James, and John – to the top of a mountain, and while they were there, Jesus was transfigured before them. Light started radiating out from him. He revealed the glory of God to them. And while this was happening, Moses and Elijah, these two great prophets of Israel, heroes of their faith that they had only heard stories about in Sunday School, were standing there next to Jesus. They are seeing this with their own eyes. This was like the *greatest moment of their lives*.

And understandably, they want to hold onto it forever. Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, it is *good* for us to be here! Let's set up three tents – one for *you*, one for *Moses*, and one for *Elijah* – so that we can stay here together *forever!*” But while he is still speaking, a bright cloud covers them, and the voice of God speaks from the cloud and says, “This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” And just like that, it's all over. The most incredible experience of their lives has come to an end, and they had to go back down the mountain. And what we're going to look at today is *why*. It's Transfiguration Sunday, but we're not going to look at the story of the transfiguration anymore. We're going to look at what happens *after*, when they go back *down* the mountain. Because I think *that* is where we discover what it means to be the church.

Last week, we talked about how the church exists not because of our personal preferences, our likes and dislikes, or the agreement of its members. The church exists because God has *gathered*

us together. Our union is not based on *our* choices, but on *God's* choice. The church is not the work of *our* hands; we are *God's* work. And what we're going to see through this story today is *why* God has gathered us together. What is the *purpose* in all of this? Is it just for *us* to experience the glory of God and grow in our knowledge and love of God? Or is there something *more*, some greater purpose for which God gathers us together?

We read this story in three sections today, because there are three distinct movements to it. And each movement tells us something about what it means to be the people of God. First, what we just heard, they go *up* the mountain, experience the glory of God, and they want to stay there forever, but they can't. God says to them, "*This* is my son. *Listen* to *him*." Don't listen to your own voices or preferences or desires; what *you* want. Listen to *him*. To be the people of God, the body of Christ, means that we cannot base what we do on *our* thoughts, feelings, and desires. We base our lives and our life together on the voice of Jesus Christ, going where *Christ* calls us to go, doing what *Christ* calls us to do, even when it *conflicts* with our personal preferences.

And what Christ is calling us to do is not stay off by ourselves, removed from the rest of the world, in some mountaintop experience, basking in the glory of God. Peter, James, and John were gathered together to experience the glory of God, but they were not permitted to just stay there, by themselves, forever. They had to go back down the mountain. And in the same way, Christ gathers *us* to experience the glory of God together, and then to go *bear witness* to that glory in the world.

As they are coming back down the mountain, it says, Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about what happened on the mountain. "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." This is something that happens a lot in the gospels, especially in

Mark's gospel. They have this amazing experience with Jesus, and then immediately Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about it. Why not? I mean, wouldn't that help bring *more* people to Jesus? If they heard about all these amazing things he does, if they heard that this is God's beloved Son (and that a voice from heaven *said so*), wouldn't that help more people *believe* in Jesus as the Messiah? Why *wouldn't* Jesus want a good word-of-mouth P.R. campaign?

Because, people are always attracted to the *sensational*, and that's not what Jesus is about. Jesus doesn't want people's faith in him to be based on what he can *do* for them. Would you want someone to love you only because of what you can *do* for them? Jesus wants people coming to him based on this deeply-held trust that *this* is God with us; that this person shows us who God is, what God is like, and what God wants for us. I mean, what does Jesus say after his resurrection, "Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet have come to believe." We can't base our faith in Christ on miracles and spectacles and *acts* that give us *proof*. It is based on the goodness of God and the truth that we see in his very *being*. The fruit of the Spirit that we see him bearing. Jesus is not a means to an end. He is the fullness of God with us, and that is *enough*. We order our lives around him based on *who he is* not *what he does*.

But I also think the reason Jesus orders his disciples not to tell anyone about what they saw on the mountaintop is because he doesn't just want them *talking* about it, *telling* people he is the Messiah. He wants them to go out and live in ways that *show people* he is the Messiah. Anyone can *talk* about the glory of God and this mountaintop experience, but the challenge is whether we can go back down the mountain and live and act in ways that allow other people to see the glory of God through us. What *difference* has it made in our lives? Can *we* bear the fruit of the Spirit that we see in Christ? We are gathered by Christ to experience the glory of God, and then to live in ways that bear witness to that glory in the world.

When they finally come back down the mountain, there is a crowd of people there waiting for them. A man who comes to Jesus and says, “Would you please heal my son? He’s *sick*, and if something doesn’t change soon, I’m worried he’s going to die.” You see, the *reason* they had to come back down the mountain is because there are people in need of healing. They have this amazing experience, but they can’t stay there forever, because there is work to do. *We* have been gathered together in the loving embrace of Jesus Christ to experience the glory of God, but we can’t just stay here basking in that glory by ourselves because we have a *job* to do. The crowds are waiting, and there is a world in need of healing. Jesus calls us to go back down the mountain and bear witness to his healing, life-giving presence; to show the world what is possible in Christ.

The *reason* that we are gathered together in Christ is *for* the *world*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that “the church is the church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others.” We are transformed *for* the world. We exist, not for our *own* sake, but for *God’s* sake, to serve God and give the world a glimpse of what it looks like to live under the rule and reign of God; to bear witness to the *new* world that is possible and coming when God makes all things new.

The church is a *missional* body. We do not just *do* mission (like mission trips and service projects). Our very *nature* is one of mission. It is not just what we *do*, it is *who we are*. We are *gathered* to be *sent*. And this sending is not *in addition to* our gathering, like there’s our communal life together, and then there’s our missional work. *In* our gathering, in our shared life

together, the church makes visible to the world what the good news of Jesus Christ is all about.¹ We show the world the love and the healing and the life that is possible; we show them that in this fiercely polarized world, people of different races and genders and nationalities and political opinions *can* love one another and live life together. Theologian David Stubbs says that the church is a community called to embody in its visible, common life God's intention for all of creation. In our very gathering and way of life, in our *very being* as the church, we show the love of God to the world and invite more people to join the gathering work of Jesus Christ.

Think about the parade downtown on Thursday. Millions of people from every walk of life, gathered together to celebrate. Was the parade just for the Eagles players; to celebrate *them*? No, because if there had been no *crowd* there, there would be no one to celebrate. So was the celebration just for the *crowd*? No, because without the team, there would be nothing to celebrate. The parade was for the crowd and the team to celebrate *together*; to share the glory *together*. In the same way, without the *world*, there is no church, because that's who we are gathered *for*. And without the church, there is no glimpse of God's coming kingdom to celebrate. The celebration is about the church and the world sharing in the glory of God *together*.

The *reason* we have to go back down the mountain is because what we have experienced is too good to keep to ourselves. We have to share it with the world. A world in such desperate need of healing. The world that God gathered us *from*, and the world that God gathered us *for*, in Christ.

¹ Edwin Chr. Van Driel, "To Be Gathered *is* To Be Sent," unpublished manuscript.