

8 Epiphany Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Depending on who is telling the story, different characters can be portrayed in different ways. This is especially true of the Gospel reading today. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have accounts of the story of the transfiguration, yet the account we hear from Matthew leaves out a key detail that completely changes how we look at Peter in this story. After Jesus is transformed on the mountain and his clothes become impossibly white, and Moses and Elijah appeared, Peter tells Jesus that he wants to build three dwelling places: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. In Matthew, the story simply moves on from there, but in both Luke and Mark the story adds an important detail. These gospels tell us that Peter's desire to build three dwelling places came from a place of ignorance—that he did not know what else to say because he was too confused or too afraid to think of a more appropriate response. Though Peter witnessed this miraculous transformation, he himself had yet to be transformed, and so he spoke out of ignorance and fear. Matthew is the only account of the transfiguration that leaves this out. Maybe Matthew did not agree that Peter spoke out of ignorance or fear, so he left that portion out of the story. But I'm more inclined to think that the truth of the matter is that even after Peter knew that Jesus was the Messiah, and even after he went up with Jesus and saw the miraculous transformation that Jesus underwent—his face shining like the sun and his clothes turning dazzling white—Peter just didn't know how to react.

Peter, though he was an apostle, was only human. And I think we can all relate to the fact that even when we feel strong in our faith, we may not know what to do with it. Having faith doesn't just magically transform us into better people. It may inspire us to try to do more good in our lives, but it can be difficult to figure out just how we are supposed to do that. Luckily, God gives us a good model to follow if we do want to live more moral lives at the transfiguration of Christ. The same message that he tells Peter, James, and John applies to us: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him."

We heard some of Jesus' teachings on moral behavior in the last two Sunday's Gospel readings. In them we are told that we should not murder, which most of us could probably figure out on our own, but also to not even get angry at our brothers and sisters. To love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. These are helpful guidelines for us to follow if we want to live out our faith in our lives, but it can be hard to figure out exactly how we are supposed to interpret these commands in our everyday lives, or whether we need to follow all of these rules all of the time. Reading the scriptures alone may not give us all the information we feel we need, but we Episcopalians have other authorities that can help us interpret scripture. Episcopalians often talk about the three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason. We believe that all of these inform how we are able to learn about God and what God would have us do. Though we ourselves did not see the transfiguration or other events in scripture with our own eyes, through our faith we have been transformed. And because of this the will of God, the knowledge of right and wrong can be made more clear to us through exploring scripture, looking to our tradition, and making use of our God-given gift of reason.

If we use this three legged stool, we can get a better idea of how we are to follow some of the difficult commands that Jesus gives us in the Gospel, and we can avoid reacting out of ignorance or fear as Peter did. For example, we're told by Christ that we should not get angry at our brothers and sisters, and that we should love not only our neighbors, but love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. Our tradition can help shed some light on these commands. In our baptismal service, all who are present vow to seek and serve Christ in ALL persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. We pray that God will teach those who are baptized how to love others and to send them into the world in witness to God's love. Using this

tradition and our God-given reason, we can more fully understand Christ's commands. For if we are angry with our brothers and sisters, or if we hate our enemies, just as others do, then that affects our ability to witness to God's love in the world. How can we be faithful witnesses of the transforming power of Christ, of his saving death, his glorious resurrection and ascension, if we love no differently than others? How can we claim to have received the unconditional love of Christ and his saving grace, though we are undeserving, if we withhold our own love and grace towards those we feel are undeserving? How can we claim that all people are created by God while denying the humanity of certain groups of people?

Earlier in the epistle we read today, 2 Peter tells us "we must make every *effort* to support our faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love." And 2 Peter tells us why this effort is so important. It says that "if these things are ours and are increasing among us, they keep us from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins" and would be acting, not out of faith and love, but out of ignorance and fear as Peter did. As a people who have been saved and forgiven in spite of our wrongdoings, we are called by God to live our lives in a way that shows forth our faith. As a people who truly and faithfully believe we have received grace and forgiveness we, in turn, are called to treat others, even those who make us angry, even our enemies, with grace and forgiveness. For that transformational gift we have received far outweighs the gifts we would ever be able to give to others.

The season of Lent is almost upon us, and in Lent we sometimes have the tendency to fixate on our flaws and wrongdoings, to feel badly about those flaws and wrongdoings, and stop there. We can forget the transformational power that faith in Christ gives. We may remember Peter acting ignorantly on the mountain, but forget his mighty witness in the book of Acts. But this kind of thinking usually isn't usually helpful in our faith lives. If we work to grow in the knowledge and love of God and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we can't just bewail our manifold sins. If anything, this kind of thinking paralyzes us and prevents us from doing the work God has prepared for us to walk in.

Lent is not only a time to renew our repentance, but also to renew our faith, to renew our efforts to live our lives in a way that follows Christ's commands. The Book of Common Prayer tells us that we are to observe Lent by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. During this upcoming season, we can use the three-legged stool of scripture, reason, and tradition to reflect on our behavior and our faith. We can remember the "cleansing of past sins" that we have been promised. And by remembering that Christ has achieved for us forgiveness of sins, we are better able to understand the gift that has been given to us—to understand how we have been transformed by Christ and how we are to transform our own lives in order to show forth that gift to others. So this Lent, let us be intentional about our study of scripture. Let us more fully live into the tradition of our church. And let us use our God-given gift of reason to discover how we might transform our lives to follow Christ's commands and to show forth the glory of God to the world. Amen.