

Transfiguration Sunday – Keli Pennington

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Before we start Godly Play each week, before the kids can even enter the classroom, we ask, “Are you ready?”—meaning, “Are you ready to come into the classroom and encounter God?” I don’t know about you, but it takes me some time to get ready. Whether it’s to be in Godly Play, just to get out of bed on a cold day, or to fully enter into prayer, I need time to mentally prepare myself. And, like any good type-A person, many times I feel like I need to get ready to get ready!

Today, Transfiguration Sunday, is our time to get ready to get ready. Later this week we begin the season of Lent. The Godly Play curriculum reminds us that we need six whole weeks of Lent in order to get ready for the mystery of Easter. This is more time than we spend preparing for the mystery of Christmas, because it’s an even greater mystery. I add to this train of thought by proposing that Lent itself is so important, we need a day to get ready for Lent so that during Lent we can get ready for Easter; hence, today we are getting ready to get ready.

The transfiguration gets us ready for Lent by giving us a foretaste of what’s waiting for us at the end—Easter and the resurrection.

In fact, the physical description of a Jesus filled with and surrounded by light, like in today’s Gospel passage, sounds an awful lot like when he comes out of the tomb, or in other post-resurrection stories. This image conjures up excitement about the celebration that we know is to come on Easter Sunday. But when we pause in our excitement and in the glow of the transfigured glory of Christ to think about the road that we must follow him on before we can get to Easter, we begin to deflate, realizing that we, like him, have to suffer first. Like Elijah repeats to Elisha, so Jesus is saying to us, “I’m going to die;” and we, like Elisha, get to respond, *I will not leave you*, knowing full well what lies ahead, and we continue on with him.

Our collect for today summarizes this well, having us pray, “Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.” Today we must celebrate the revelation of Christ’s glory and his defeat of death so that we will be strengthened to bear our cross and be changed into his likeness during the season of Lent.

Our Gospel passage today begins with, *Six days later*, which is reminding us that the true beginning of the passage happened six days earlier and is found in the prior chapter. It’s a passage that’s probably pretty familiar to us: *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.*

Hmmm, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, contemplating what we center our lives around, trying to understand the depths of our soul and our relationship to God, weighing the cost of discipleship—sounds like Lent to me, or at least what Lent is supposed to do to us.

In order to let Jesus' words affect our lives during, and especially after Lent, we need to be transformed in this season. The word Paul uses in Romans 12:2 when he says, *Do not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*, is the same Greek word that is used for the transfiguration. If we are to be transformed, just as Jesus is transformed during the transfiguration, it's helpful to first explore the significance of the people present at the transfiguration, what their presence tells us, and the questions that those answers raise. Spoiler alert: as I begin to pose these questions, I don't intend to answer them here, but rather allow them to begin to prepare our hearts and minds for Lent.

When Moses and Elijah show up at the transfiguration, our biblical memories harken back to their Old Testament stories and begin to breathe new life into them. Moses symbolizes the Law, as presented to the Israelites in the desert, and Elijah the promise of the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets were the foundation of life and the hope for the future for the Israelites, and here we see them come together as Jesus prepares to fulfill both. Although Moses and Elijah were spared normal deaths, the one who is the epitome of both, God's own son, must die a very painful, gruesome death. If we, as God's children as well, are to follow Jesus down this road of transformation, we should expect to experience this kind of radiant glory and intimacy with God, but the impending suffering too. Are we tempted to focus more on the Son of God in glory, hoping that we will follow in his footsteps more prominently?

We can't ask this question and not talk about Peter, because we're always Peter, right?! Peter tries to do and say the right thing, but instead tends to miss the point all together. He suggests that they all get comfortable up there on the mountain with the legends of the faith and enjoy the glory. The glory can't last forever though, since this is not the expected triumphant military Messiah. Jesus is the suffering Messiah. Although Jesus has hinted, if not outright said, to his disciples that he is a suffering servant, there's still a hesitance, a discomfort, a fear of this unexpected Messiah among the disciples that Peter happens to express—and a fear that I think we are still tempted to hold on to. We like our bright and shiny Jesus. That's the Jesus we want to imitate and the promise of God we want to cling to. While we can't really blame Peter for being afraid during the transfiguration, is it just fear in the moment or is the fear deeper? Is it fear of being face to face with God or fear of the cross? Is the fear springing from our desire to identify with the glorified Messiah rather than the suffering Messiah?

Regardless of what Peter was experiencing or thinking, those deep-seated fears are the ones we must confront today and into Lent in order to get ready for a life with Christ. So where does that leave us? How can we take steps today to get ready to make the most out of Lent? Drawing back on the parallels between the Gospel and 2nd Kings passages: today, like the passages, is an in-between time. As we waited for Elijah's time to come to

an end and Elisha's to begin, we today stand on the precipice of Lent; it's visible, but not quite here. W.M. Loyd Allen's commentary on the 2nd Kings passage encourages us to respond to these in-between times with persistence and silence, just as Elisha did. Will we actively persist on the journey that is in front of us, knowing that suffering and sorrows lie ahead and that it's not always the bright and shiny celebratory Jesus? In these times, will we keep following our Master in order to become closer to him and more like him, whatever the transformation might cost us?

And when someone like me keeps asking you these questions, are you ready to echo Elisha and say, "Yes, I know, be silent," so as to reflect upon the seemingly impossible, somewhat frightening, and always paradoxical burdens of bearing our cross and joyfully being transformed into the cruciform shape of a suffering Messiah? Today we have the opportunity to persist on our walk with Christ as well as to persist in asking these reflective questions, and then be okay with sitting in silence as we struggle to answer and be transformed.

This is when you're probably thinking: "Keli, I thought you said today was about basking in the glory and celebrating before we get to the somberness of Lent? Instead you've brought us right up to the line of downright gloom, and I'm not feeling too glorious or strong right now!" Well, you're not wrong, but I think even as we begin to reflect on these more serious questions, our transformations begin, and that indeed is glorious!

But what I want to leave us with is that ultimately, in the midst of these questions we must ponder, our Gospel and 2nd Kings passages remind us that God always shows up in a powerful way. For as we said in our Psalm, our God does not come quietly. Whether he meets us on a mountaintop like Jesus and the disciples or out in the nameless wilderness like Elijah and Elisha, he is there. Now, let's be honest, neither of these experiences are normal or what we may want or expect, but that's why we have to get ready. God is doing unexpected things, and asking us to do hard things that will require suffering and taking up our cross. In the world we live in, we don't have to think long to imagine what might be required of us. But even in the getting ready, even in the struggles we have with others, for others, and with ourselves, we keep on, knowing that he's waiting for us. Regardless of if it's Lent or Easter, regardless of if it's a moment of glory or of suffering, the same one we called Emmanuel in the manger, God with us, is there. Is here.