

Matthew covers in seven verses what the compilers of the Exodus narrative take fifteen chapters to tell.

In Exodus 19–34, the Israelites arrive at the Desert of Sinai. God calls Moses up to the mountain to establish a covenant, declaring that if they obey, they will be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Mount Sinai is covered in smoke, fire, and shaking violently as God descends; God answers Moses in thunder. God speaks the Ten Commandments directly to the people, outlining laws on idolatry, the Sabbath, and ethical conduct. Moses stays on the mountain for 40 days. In his absence, the people worship a golden calf. Moses descends, breaks the tablets in anger, and later returns to renew the covenant.

When Moses returns from the mountain the second time with new tablets, his face is radiant, causing the people to be afraid. He wears a veil to speak with them.

As the covenant community struggled with being faithful to (obeying) their end of the covenant, *Adonai* called prophets to reflect their waywardness and call them back. One of those prophets, Isaiah, spoke of an “enigmatic figure called YHWH’s ‘servant’” four times throughout chapter 40–55. This servant is of Jacob/Israel, and is set apart by God before birth and, as we heard Leslie read, “charge(d) to ‘bring forth justice to the nations’. ...This servant voluntarily submits to violent persecution, by which others are made righteous. God ultimately rewards and vindicates” this servant. (*The Westminster Study Bible* ©2024, p1011)

The prophet concludes with the words, “See, the former things have come to pass, / and new things I now declare; / before they spring forth, / I tell you of them.”

These are two major highlights that serve as the context for the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. What happens in this story is the continuation of God’s mission with a covenant people, but it is being conceived in a new way through Jesus, the Christ. The story of the Transfiguration is the way the baton of one tradition is handed off to the next. It is the new vision.

For 16 chapters Matthew has told the readers that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. In the verses preceding this story, the disciple of Jesus named Simon, declares that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (16:16) Jesus responds to him in affirmation: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.” In that moment, it’s as if the clouds depart and the rays of light shine down upon Simon, and the angels sing, “Ahhhhhh!”

*{Actually, the name “Jonah” means “dove.” So, in a sense this revelation being heaven-sent ties back to Jesus’ baptism when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove!}*

I love this moment, because it shows us how thin the veil is between us and the inspiration of God. It is so significant that Jesus gives Simon son of Jonah a new name, “Peter” which means “rock,” because Peter will serve as the foundation for the church. And yet, it stays true to our humanity, because not too long after that bit of revelation, Jesus reveals that, as a true reflection of Isaiah’s servant, he

would have to “undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes” in Jerusalem. Peter lets his heart out and reacts by saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Having used God’s name in vain, Peter’s humanity becomes a stumbling block, and Jesus rebukes him. It’s so like us – one moment we are capable of opening ourselves to divine revelation, performing acts of righteousness, and in the next we forsake God in thought, word or deed.

That doesn’t prevent Jesus from trying to hammer home the message of who he is and who the disciples are called to be. Right before the journey up the mountain, Jesus tells them, 24 “To walk the road with me, you must turn away from your own path, and always be ready to carry your cross with me to the place of ultimate sacrifice. 25 The ones who hold on to their lives will not find life, but the ones who are willing to let go of their lives, for me and my message, will find *the true* life. 26 How will it help you to get everything you want but lose this life? Is there anything in this world worth trading for your life? (Mt 16:24-26, *First Nations Version*)

Friends, the more I study Jesus and his call for discipleship, ~~the more difficult~~, no, the more called to sacrifice, the more intentionality I glean from the call. I’m not sure the message of Jesus was meant for mass audiences ... unless the mass audiences are willing to see Jesus as a master teacher worth sacrificing material successes on and apprenticing with.

(This thought gives me new insight into the story of Mary and Martha from Luke’s gospel (ch10). Our desire is to be like Martha and do the work creating a house of the Lord – the church – without attending to the “why” of it. Jesus says

that Mary is doing the better part by putting her full concentration on Jesus' teaching. When Jesus speaks of sacrificing one's life to find *the true* life, do we grasp what that means for ourselves? Are we able to clear out our desire for personal gain, in order to fulfill the law and the prophets as Jesus did and commanded his followers to do? To be "a light to the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." (Is 42:6-7)

The term "servant leadership" is thrown around a lot these days - but we just call it "discipleship." And it needs to be the "why" of our being a church, and the "why" of our being part of this expression of Christ's body.

It's daunting work. At first it seems somewhat simple. "Lord, it is good that we are here," Peter says, as the vision of Jesus being the fulfillment of the law and the prophets is revealed before him on the mountain, "let's build tents for the three of you."

Love the initiative Peter takes, but he still has his energy motivating in the wrong direction. With a sense of urgency, and a nod toward the thundering God of Moses on Mt. Sinai, the Voice booms that Jesus is God's beloved, in whom God is pleased, and is punctuated by the command to "listen to him." At that, Peter, James and John fall to their knees in fear, and recognize that this is no longer about God (Law/Prophets) being relegated to a tent that can be picked up and moved around - it is now about following the *One who is the vessel and has called them to FOLLOW*. Matthew makes it clear to his readers - and to us - what Jesus was calling followers to do. For immediately once they reach the bottom of the mountain, "they were met by a crowd of waiting people. As they

approached, (someone) came out of the crowd and fell to (their) knees begging, ‘Master, have mercy...’” (17:14-15)

The covenant of God has always had its mission granting mercy on the vulnerable. But, mind you, not in a sense of charity. God makes it clear that we are included in that vulnerable lot. (Peter serves as a great reminder of our weakness that goes hand-in-hand with our faithfulness!) We don’t have a leg up on anyone. As we serve others, so too are we empowered and made whole.

The story of the Transfiguration is situated at the beginning of the Season of Lent as a reminder of the cost of discipleship, and, as well, the joy that comes with it. I invite this story to be a summons to us all (and I am 100% including myself in this) to take seriously Jesus’ call to discipleship, and how we will respond. Just as Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai grasping the covenant call God had on the community he was leading; just as Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness struggling with the forces that tempt us to claim power and privilege (we’ll get into that more next week); Lent offers us 40 days to discern the stumbling blocks that prevent us from approaching Jesus and setting our minds on the teachings that will help us attain true life for ourselves and with those around us.

Next week, we will begin studying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples – found in Matthew 6:9-13. The Faith Formation Team is convinced that within the simplicity of this prayer is contained profound insight into what Jesus viewed as the right way of living in community – one which stirs us up to work for freedom and peace for ourselves and one another. It’s a radical vision, one in which there are no delineations between the haves and the have-nots. And when we are lured (being “led into temptation,” one might say) into forsaking this

vision of equity, Jesus includes prescriptions for breaking those patterns of living. We invite you to set aside the Thursday evenings in Lent to join us on this journey. As together, like Simon Peter, James and John, we work together to noodle out this new vision offered before us – following Jesus in ways we never imagined. May God bless us through our travels up and down the mountain throughout the season of Lent and beyond. Amen.