
Transfiguration of Jesus and the Disciples

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Last Epiphany – Year B

When I first found my way back to church as an adult, I felt God’s presence all around me. My spirit was steadily stirred by beauty of the liturgy, the miracle of receiving communion, and the indisputable presence of God when I prayed. I was convinced I was on the fast track to perfection and union with God. Blessed with spiritual consolations, I longed for them, and tried to recreate them, and came to mistake them for the goal of my spiritual life.

But then the high moments came less often. My prayer life started to feel dry, because I didn’t sense that same connection or peace in prayer. And when I didn’t get what I prayed for, I worried that I was doing something wrong, or that God had forgotten me.

Ironically, it was then, when the mountaintop experiences were fewer and farther between, and when it became harder to discern Christ’s presence and direction, that I really began to learn about Christian discipleship.

The Gospel of Mark dispels any romantic notions we might have about discipleship, or about the disciples themselves. I bet the first disciples felt a bit like I did when Jesus first called them: special, curious, honored to be chosen, which made it easier to drop everything and take off after him. Then, when they saw Jesus healing people and exorcising demons and walking on water—when they saw his fame spreading and the crowds around him building—they probably felt justified, and proud to have “discovered” him and to have been the first to jump on his bandwagon.

However, they still didn’t quite understand what it meant to follow Jesus—and they weren’t always good at it. They kept second guessing him, and sometimes getting in his way. And they were as confused as everyone else about his identity and the kind of power he wielded.

So, in the middle of Mark, just before our reading today, Jesus asks them who they think he is. “You are the Messiah,” Peter answers, correctly. Ah, now we’re getting somewhere!

But then, when Jesus starts explaining what this means—that he’ll undergo great suffering and rejection and death—Peter doesn’t like what he hears, and he objects. That isn’t what he signed up for! This isn’t the kind of Messiah he wanted! Perhaps wishing himself that Peter were right, and dreading what is to come, Jesus rebukes him sharply.

Then, aware that the time has come to head to Jerusalem and face all that waits for him there, Jesus starts teaching his friends about the hard road of discipleship: *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”*

Then, six days after this, something very strange happens: Jesus leads Peter and James and John up a high mountain for the quintessential mountaintop experience. Suddenly, they see him in dazzling white clothes, talking with Elijah and Moses, two of Israel’s greatest heroes. Jesus is transfigured, so that his glory shines through him in a way that the disciples can’t help but see—so that they, too, and their vision, are also transformed at this moment.

“This is it!” Peter thinks, in awe and terror. “This is the moment we’ve been waiting for! Now I see who Jesus is, now I see

what this is all about, now everyone else will see, too!” Wanting to *do* something right away, to prolong—to capture—this moment, he suggests building three booths, one for each member of this prophetic summit.

But before Jesus can answer, God’s voice booms out of the clouds, just like at Jesus’ baptism: “This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him!” *This* is the answer to Peter’s question. *This* is what he’s supposed to do: *listen* to Jesus, even when he doesn’t like what he hears. *Follow* Jesus, even when he doesn’t like where he’s going.

This holy moment, this transforming revelation of Christ’s glory—this religious experience is not the end, or purpose, of Jesus’ journey, or of the disciples’ journey with him.

In fact, even after the Transfiguration, the disciples’ faith is far from perfect. They continue to blunder: they compete with each other; turn away little children; fall asleep when Jesus needs them most.

But they also continue to learn and grow. And to be transformed, slowly, gradually, as they walk with Jesus, and listen to him and discover themselves what it really means to follow him.

And where does Jesus lead them? Well, first, he trades this radiant glory for the tired, dusty, vulnerable body of a human being. And then, when he is “only Jesus” again—plain old ordinary Jesus—he leads them back down the mountain, straight into the messy, hurting, dangerous world below. And he leads them toward Jerusalem, the center of the religious and political conflicts of his day, and the place where he’ll be betrayed, arrested, condemned as a criminal, and executed.

Jesus is willing to take up the cross that waits for him. And his disciples will have to be willing to, too, if they’re going to stay with him.

Discipleship, you see, isn’t about achieving mountaintop experiences, or climbing the ladder of spiritual success. It’s not about knowing where we’re going. It’s not about arriving at all. Discipleship is about *following*. Being on the move—never becoming so comfortable that we can’t go where Christ is leading, or so complacent in our convictions that we can’t hear Christ’s new word.

Discipleship is about *following Jesus*, whether he’s leading us up the mountain or back down; whether we see him in his dazzling white clothes or in dirty rags or in a prison uniform; whether he’s consorting with Moses and Elijah, or with homeless youth or crack addicts or our own worst enemies; whether we know where he’s leading us or not.

Jesus’ path is not an easy one, and following him means giving up control and comfort; being at odds with the values of the world; going into the places that scare us most. It means living with ambiguity, insecurity, and vulnerability. And yet also with hope, trusting in the memory and the promise of Christ’s glory.

Discipleship requires that we remember who we are following, and listening to: the beloved Son of God, who loves us enough to come down the mountain and to show us another way. And as we follow Christ down the mountain—as we follow him to Jerusalem, and through the wilderness of Lent and the Passion of Holy Week—we will be surprised by that glory over and over. And we, too, will be transfigured along the way.