

Rev. Jennifer Peters McCurry
Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church, Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA
March 6, 2011 • Transfiguration Sunday (A)

Exodus 24:12-18
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

My last year has been filled with many conversations about the difficulties of being “the church” today. Our society used to have a much more honored place for involvement in a congregation. There are all sorts of ideas about why that was the case then. But it’s now a totally different time in history. There are plenty of things that can keep us and our neighbors occupied on Sunday mornings: Sleep, Work, Sports, Homework, Errands, Chores. Our lives are so full that going to church has to be an intentional choice. We all know that, because we have made choices to be here.

So what is the church supposed to be or to do now? How do we share that something important is happening here? We can be tempted to think there is a magic answer. We look for the right program – or advertising strategy – or music – or staffing. The fact is that our choices about all those things do make some difference. Congregations who are able to hire a staff member who specializes in youth can often better reach out to and nurture faith in youth.

But questions about programming or music don’t cut to the heart of the issue. What matters most is the substance of a congregation’s life. What is a church’s understanding of God? How do Christian relationships

and a sense of community fit into that understanding? How can we invite and welcome new people to join the journey? As we ponder our congregation's ministry now, and our plans for the future, it is important for us to consider all of these.



Our gospel lesson today centers on who Jesus is. I invite you to consider the story again with that first question in mind: What is our congregation's understanding of God? The answer should help us to form how we articulate our identity. It may also help guide some choices we make in ministry.

The story from *Matthew* focuses on a moment of glorious revelation of who Christ is. The fullness of Jesus is shown to three of the disciples. This should be familiar – the story itself is one that we hear, year after year, in slightly different versions. It tells us the beautiful story of Jesus' transfiguration.

Our text says that while Jesus, Peter, James, and John were on the mountain top, suddenly, the glory of God was revealed. "And [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." (*Mt. 17:2*) They saw Jesus as he was... finally. Though they had looked at him every day for a long while, the time was right to see in a new light. He was different! He was changed. It was marvelous. Jesus was a wonderful glimpse of God's presence with them! What a gift – the disciples had the eyes to see him truly.

And this was indeed the God whom they worshiped, the God of their forefathers. “Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.” (17:3) For the disciples, this vision showed a deep connection with their faith, and with the past. They saw Moses, the only Jew who had ever seen God, face to face. The one who had received the law from God, which grew from the covenant formed with Abram. They saw Elijah, the prophet. He was the one whom Jews believed would come again, before the day of the Lord. With this vision, the disciples saw Jesus take his place among the “greats” of Israel. As Moses and Elijah talked with him, their respect for Jesus was clear. But it was not a situation of equals together. The vision revealed something even more special in Jesus, beyond either Moses or Elijah.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about this whole vision was that it wasn't just a static. It wasn't as if they saw a flat picture, painted forever more. The experience was much more interactive, much more engaging. The God of Israel spoke, clarifying a relationship of love and delight with this Jesus. “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased...” (17:5) Yet God also pointed to Jesus as the living word. The disciples were instructed to “listen to him!” (17:5) Surrounded by the glory of the law and the prophets, Jesus was a living voice of authority among them. God told the disciples to listen to what he taught and what he said.

As the story continues, we see that it wasn't just about what Jesus said, either. Peter, James, and John were understandably freaked out by

the whole experience. They “fell to the ground” and were afraid. (17:6)
Jesus responded with compassion and care, and with a healing touch. He
“came and touched them;” he encouraged them and calmed their fears.
(17:7) He was not distant, or impersonal. He remained with them and saw
their responses with concern. Jesus healed them, by his touch and his
words.



What is our congregation’s understanding of God? As we hear this
story, we are minded of some of our key beliefs about Jesus. Every time
we read a story, there is a layer of interpretation. Someone could read the
transfiguration and say that Jesus is all about glory and honor, and that’s
where he prefers to be, instead of in the dirty and dark places of human
life. That’s not Emanuel’s though – that’s not something that we would
say about Jesus at all.

Instead, we see Jesus glorified as God, in his words, in his body, and
in his ministry. Obviously back then he was very much alive. Yet we
believe that even now God’s presence and work is truly living, in and
through Jesus. The word of God comes alive to us, through the living
Word that is Jesus. When we hear it or read it, in the context of the church,
new insights emerge. God speaks to the challenges of our lives in new
invitations. Most of us are not beholding glamorous visions such as these.
We receive Christ’s presence through the Holy Spirit in the waters of

baptism – at the table – in relationships with one another in the church – in prayer and worship – and as we serve in Christ’s name.

Jesus’ presence is not just alive in a general way, for the disciples in the story or for us. Church, and our congregation in particular, is worshiping and following Jesus, who knows us and loves us, who forgives us and heals us. Who shares with us the gift of his faith, when we are welcomed into the body of his church. Who meets our fear and confusion and stubbornness with patience and grace. Just as for the disciples, it can be overwhelming for us to encounter all of the wonder of who Jesus is. But it is not a generic God whom we worship. We follow a God who cares for us personally.

We follow this Jesus Christ, who was revealed. Living and drawing us to new life. Gathering us in community, yet with a very personal love. Present most clearly at worship and prayer, in the word and in the sacraments.

The church celebrates a mountain top moment today! This feast day marks a high point, another blessing of Jesus, as he embarks on a long journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. For Emanuel’s the day is not so much an untouchable high, or a surreal moment in the clouds. Instead the vision serves as quite the opposite – and it happens to be perfect that this is our last day of winter worship in the basement. This is a day when God reminds us of our glorious foundation, our beautiful grounding, in our Savior Jesus Christ. What a vision! What love! What a gift! Amen.