

Sermon "Transfiguration"

Rev. Courtney Jones.

Singing is something I've always loved, but for years I limited myself to singing alone, in solitude. It was so anxiety-provoking that even when I sang in church, in the choir and an occasional "special music" piece, I was terrified. What if I was brought to shame? What if I forgot the words, or missed a note? What if, what if, what if...? But a couple of years ago, I gathered my courage and auditioned for a chorus...and I have sung with that chorus ever since. I sang timidly at first, afraid to let others hear me, assuming that if there was a mistake in my section, that it was me. Around the same time, I began trying my hand at singing in small groups, with folks I trusted not to judge me and who loved to sing for its own sake. I was practicing. It felt vulnerable, letting others hear me. As I practiced, though, I began to focus more on the music I was creating with my fellow singers and less on whether or not I got everything exactly right. Over time, my confidence grew, and I began to relax, to trust that the notes were there, to trust that the song lived somewhere inside me. It's been a process, but now when I sing, I feel as at home in my skin as I ever have, and it's glorious. A friend told me recently that I light up when I sing, and I can at last believe it. I wonder, when do you feel that way? When are you most in touch with the holy Light in you? How do you tap into transcendent Love?

Today's Scripture bridges two parts of Mark's gospel-the miracles of Jesus' ministry (the moments of Epiphany, the scenes that defy logic or reason, of angels and kings and a stable, of shirking the religious elite in favor of fishermen who leave their nets without a second thought, of miraculous healings). In Lent, we will turn to the vulnerable humanity of Jesus' road to Jerusalem. But today, we are on a mountain with him, where yet another miraculous moment marks his ministry.

Then Jesus asks the disciples to hold all they had just seen as a secret. Why?! If something so amazing had happened, something that corroborated the identity of Jesus as God's Beloved One, why wouldn't they shout it from the rooftops? I think this is a moment of great transcendence and also great vulnerability. Jesus was seen in all his resplendent glory, but he insisted on keeping it among the four of them. I wonder if he was trying to protect himself, knowing that with each unbelievable occurrence, he was drawing more attention and more ire. In Luke's rendering of the story of Jesus' birth, the gospel writer says that Mary, rather than telling all that she had seen and heard, pondered all she had seen and heard "in her heart." Maybe Jesus was so overwhelmed that he needed to hold the tender moment in his heart and not give it away to the world; sometimes intimate moments beg to be held so gently and carefully rather than shared with those who would not treat them with the honor they deserve.

Brene Brown, my guru par excellence, says that vulnerability is risk, but that the way to live authentically is to bring our humanity out of the shadows, to shine the light of truth on the stories that keep us disconnected, numbed out, heartsick. We do that, she says, by telling our stories to those who have earned the right to hear them. The transfiguration places Jesus in company of Moses, the great liberator, and Elijah, a brave and holy prophet, both of whom were called to take a stand in the face of power. Mark's story places Jesus among their ranks, revealing the place where his God-kissed divinity meets the harsh, lived reality of his calling. Like the trusted disciples who accompanied Jesus up the mountain, we are born to love, born to witness the sparkling transcendence in each other-the God-kissed holy spark and the very real, day-to-day lived experience of being only human, doing the best we can-which requires a willingness to witness the same spark in ourselves. Despite all the ways we are in the world, despite all the ways we puff up or shrink, all

the ways we try to snuff it out or keep it a secret, our truest, deepest identity is Beloved of God. It mingles with the dust of the earth, the forgotten or ignored corners of our lives, the places we are rarely willing to go. And yet, when our belovedness meets the mundane, we are dazzling, radiant. We get to enter into the Transfiguration moment again and again, revealing our gloriousness to those who have earned the right to see the best and most vulnerable parts of ourselves.

I say all of this because we are at a tipping point, a precipice, this liminal, in-between moment bridging the joy of Epiphany with the somber soul-searching of Lent. The Transfiguration is the exact right place to be at this moment-high on a mountain, bathed in light, clothed in the radiance of our holy humanity. We are about to delve into the beginning of a huge work, the work of examining our fears as we strive for racial justice. It will require of us, each in different ways, to examine parts of ourselves we might rather leave alone, either because we are hyper-aware of the role of race and fear in our lives or because we have not seen how our privilege affects others or any number of reasons. It might reopen old wounds, it might leave us undone, and it will almost certainly require us to notice shamey corners of our lives that we have let gather dust. As a congregation, as individuals, we will find ways to be vulnerable while still protecting our hearts, I know. Because what we long for is transcendence, transfiguration, becoming, knowing. We long to love fully, to behold one another authentically, to honor our own stories so that we can honor one another.

I used to think I wasn't a singer. Now I know I am. It's a part of my life in ways I never imagined, and it helps me know something more about myself and the Divine because I can call on this spiritual practice that is organic to me. Our spiritual practice this Lent is to face fear, to stand in vulnerability so that we all might be radiant together. We have many ways of talking about ourselves in this congregation, but one of my favorites is that we say we are a learning congregation. What a great gift...and, really, what a great relief, that we get to learn and grow, not expecting perfection but expecting that with each new undertaking, we will come to know something about ourselves and the Divine as we move to God's heart and work to repair the world. But the fear-facing comes when we trek down the mountain and toward Jerusalem. For today, we get to bask in this present moment and the radiance of the in-between. Thank God for glimpses of light and love that sustain us on this journey of faith.

Amen.