

Last Sunday after Epiphany

Year A

[Exodus 24:12-18](#)

[2 Peter 1:16-21](#)

[Matthew 17:1-9](#)

[Psalm 2](#)

or [Psalm 99](#)

Preached at St. Peter's Episcopal in Redwood City

February 23, 2020

The Rev Lisa Biersch Cole

I thought she had dark hair! #listentohim

Collect

O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: 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; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

In the 1980's Walt Disney Co began to release a few of their animated classics for the home video market. VCRs were in nearly every household, including mine though we hadn't yet begun to rent children's movies. But, in 1988, when my daughter was about 4, Disney released *Cinderella* and I was excited to bring that video home for her to see. It was a favorite story of hers, read from one of my childhood fairytale books many nights before bedtime. You remember those days when you read the same story over and over – or told the same story over and over. Something in it just captured her imagination.

We made a big deal out of renting the video, popcorn, jammies, lights out. She sat on the floor in front of the couch. I pushed in the movie and moved back to sit alongside her.

The movie opens on an illustration of a magical land, the castle, panning down and over the countryside to Cinderella's home, where she and her beloved father are together by a well. A voice over begins the tale, with *Once upon a time...*

Not even a minute into the movie, does my daughter sit up straight, with a face of utter confusion, and says, "*I thought Cinderella had dark hair!*"

My daughter has her dad's coloring - olive skinned and a brunette. Not a blonde, like me. Not a blonde like Disney's *Cinderella*.

The book from which I had been reading to her was old-school; black and white with only a few line art illustrations.

I thought Cinderella had dark hair! Such disappointment! The delighted anticipatory smiling face from just seconds before had dropped into a sort of wide-eyed stare. I felt horrible for having exposed her to something that seemed to have burst her imaginative bubble.

But, at the same time, I was awed. At only 4 years old she had come to know the fairytale so well, that when a different interpretation was before her – Disney’s blonde Cinderella - her reaction was visceral and instinctual - something different was different and unexpected and not how she had imagined.

I hadn’t realized how deeply connected my daughter had become to the story – how she had entered the story and connected so that had she seen the Disney version, first, that personal experience would not have ever come her way.

From that point the rule was no videos and no movies before reading the book in their original form, ‘olde’ English, odd grammar, antiquated social conventions, lions tigers, and bears alike. Once read, we’d see the movie and talk about later – how had Hollywood animated the story – how it was simplified, dumbed down or complicated and amped up. How did it match up with what they had been allowed to imagine.

Think of any book you’ve read and loved - that you know inside and out - that has been made into a movie or a play.

Have you ever been pleased with the interpretation? Has any film gotten it right thematically but comes up short in terms of its impact on you?

To have an opinion one way or the other, you must be deeply connected and familiar with the story as written. *I thought Cinderella had dark hair* is a visceral response because the fairytale had been woven into my daughter’s imagination, she had entered the story, located herself within the narrative.

Now think of the greatest book of all, the bible, and how deeply - or not - you are connected with the story – either the grand narrative or any of its individual stories? Do you read on a regular basis or do you prefer the ‘Cliffs’ notes version or highlight reels shown on Sundays in a church near you? What kind of relationship do you have with the people who travel the mystical lands of first century Judea?

Once a year released into our worship service is one of the classic New Testament stories, *The Transfiguration*. It drops annually on the last Sunday of Epiphany, the liturgical season that has us focused on various events that manifest the divinity of Jesus *and* think about how we are called to respond to Christ in faith through the showings of his divinity.

That might be enough of a clue to trigger your memory of the story read from Matthew's gospel today - *oh, yea, the Transfiguration, Jesus's divinity. He shines on a mountain top, like Moses did.*

I grew up in a church name after this event, Church of The Transfiguration

- all the way through adulthood I had no idea what it was or meant and was, frankly, embarrassed by the name – wished we were All Saints or St John's – Transfiguration was just odd sounding

I asked some fellow parishioners of that congregation for their answer to what 'Transfiguration' is or was, and I heard similar responses,

- The time when the disciples got to see that Jesus was fully divine
- The time God named Jesus his son – like he did at the baptism – and from the cloud
- The time on the mountain-top where God claimed Jesus was divine

Google Image search *The Transfiguration* and you'll find pages of art that varies in style only – depicting the scene you have before you in the bulletin - Jesus all shiny white, a mountain-top, some other biblical characters, a cloud.

In today's Instagram world, that pic with the hashta 'jesusisdivine' would pretty much sum up what most of us know about *The Transfiguration*

#jesusisdivine is not wrong – anymore than Disney's version of Cinderella was wrong – but it is different and empty of all the rich layers of the story in which we might find connection, the ones Matthew drew upon when writing his gospel.

In fact, if Matthew happened to be scrolling through his Instagram account, he might have sat up straight away , as my daughter did in reaction to the blonde Cinderella, exclaiming

"What? #jesusisdivine? That's just like saying, FYI! News flash! #jesusis divine! You left out the cross! And Peter. Where's the response, the whole story – you've left out so so many details of the story, including the big one – to listen to him. That's God's final word on that mountain top, to listen to Jesus.

And Matthew might be disheartened to learn that many in the pews today upon the hearing *The Transfiguration* have disengaged already dreading the theological explanation of the event, or hoping – praying - for a sermon that would just talk about mountaintop moments in our lives and discerning God's voice.

Given the chance, I think Matthew might explain *The Transfiguration* story this way:

This event rocked Peters' world. Peter had just 6 days earlier called Jesus the messiah. Now this. Jesus drags him up a mountain to tell him he's doing to die.

And be resurrected. Peter's world view was being transformed - this was not unfolding how he thought it was to and Jesus was insisting he get with the program - comprehend the totality of God's plan -it included glory and blessing, yes, but also suffering and the cross for all of them, including the messiah. Peter was going to be left, along with the other disciples, to continue the work without Jesus there in person. Say what? How were they to do this without him? Jesus let him in on the whole story then touched him. Told him not to fear. How? By listening to him.

Did you catch all that when you heard the gospel this morning? That's a long way from the #jesusisdivine simplified version handed down to us by tradition.

The Transfiguration is no oddity. It is one of five narrative blockbusters of the New Testament with roots back to Creation and Exodus and extending to Peter's death bed and last letter, that we also heard from today.

Peter was chosen for this experience – dragged up that mountain - in part, because he *knew* the biblical story inside and out. A pious first century Jew, Peter had been raised on the Torah, had the expectation of a messiah returning to save Israel from permanent exile. He had sensed that this Jesus was acting out symbolically and in practice the Old Testament stories he knew so well. The mountain-top event brought Peter into to the rest of the story – gave him an experience that deepened his understanding of what God was doing in the world and how God was doing it through Jesus first and his followers, next.

We've all been invited to a transfiguration experience like Peter's – and not just on A Sunday when we read the story.

But the question is, are we yet on the mountain-top, gazing at shiny Jesus, and nodding in agreement with our pew mates that hashtag, #jesusisdivine?

Do we know the story deeply and well enough to have had any visceral reaction to its hearing this morning?

Truth is, many of us just don't know the whole story or how to mine its depth for application, transformation or otherwise.

And by us, I mean Episcopalians.

Episcopalians are the best educated among the twenty-two thousand Christian groups and denominations in the United States, but when you ask about biblical literacy we drop to almost dead last. We pride ourselves on reading a lot of Scripture in church each Sunday, but 90 percent of what we hear is forgotten within seventy-two hours. Less than 5 percent of Episcopalians attend a regular Bible study.

I quote from The Reverend Marek Zabriskie's book *The Bible Challenge* – a book he wrote to encourage congregations nation wide to start reading, rereading the greatest storybook of all time, the Bible.

He cites research that show people who engage Scripture four times or more a week have measurably higher ethical and moral behavior...

There is something about engaging God's world regularly that creates a spiritual athlete who is much closer to God and more effective at living a godly life. And when a person reads scripture each day for 21 days, there's a 80% that they will read the bible for the rest of their lives. They will glean far more from Sunday worship, follow the sermon more closely, be looking to have the preacher preach rather than merely explain and exegete a passage. ¹

He took his congregation on a journey of reading the Bible – to and with each other – reminding me of the nights reading to my daughter – reminding me of the power of that experience in formation.

Zabriskie's challenged them to a practice that when two or three were gathered – coffee hour or work party, they begin their fellowship not just with prayer, but with the bible. He writes:

People started to come alive spiritually. Many said that it was the most significant spiritual experience that they had ever had in their life.... Instead of waiting for Sunday to have a spiritual moment, they were starting to have these moments every day. This alone was transformative. Participants began coming to church spiritually alive instead of expecting a one hour worship service to make up for having done nothing all week, ... to grow closer to God. ... our church (was) transformed spiritually...²

As we Episcopalians turn our liturgical focus from Epiphany to Lent, the season of discipline and preparation for Easter, might we think about the command God sent Jesus followers to *Listen to him*. Is this a good time to give more time listening to the Word made flesh – to come to know the greatest story of all time? What is your relationship with the bible? How easy or difficult is it to relate to and find application?

Perhaps as your congregation continues to worship together in this period of transition between Rectors, you'll think about reading God's story – to each other. Not all at once, but not just on Sunday's either.

¹ Zabriskie, Marek P.. *Doing the Bible Better* (Kindle Locations 100). Church Publishing Inc.. Kindle Edition.

² Zabriskie, Marek P.. *Doing the Bible Better* (Kindle Locations 124-130). Church Publishing Inc.. Kindle Edition.

Perhaps with a little intentional listening and reading the bible, when *The Transfiguration* drops next year and you hear Mark's version, you'll hear the story in all its glory - all the moving parts and you won't want to hang out on the mountain top, but to move down into the world to do the work God has given you to do, like Peter, unafraid, lead by the Spirit and listening to him.