

In the Middle, On the Mountain
Sunday, February 14, 2021
The Last Sunday of the Epiphany
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Rev. Patrick C. Ward
Mark 9:2-9

“And he was transfigured before them.”

In the name of the One who comes to save. **AMEN**

In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan.
Earth stood hard as iron.
Water like a stone.ⁱ

I know, I know. We are this morning at the end of Epiphany. On the very cusp of Lent. These words from Christina Rossetti’s beloved Christmas carol seem to catch us where we are this week. They have always struck me, in fact, as lovely but misplaced, about 6 weeks too early.

Snow and earth hard as iron are alien to the Bethlehem in Judea that Rossetti depicts, and our own celebration of Christmas happens not in midwinter but at winter’s very beginning. We’ve come to the very middle of winter only now. Snow has fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow. Earth stands hard as iron.

Life, for many of us, seems hard as iron. I’ve read it this week in emails. I hear it explicitly or implicitly in our Zoom conversations. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation Poll, more than 56% of Americans are suffering from some degree of negative mental health effects related to the pandemic.ⁱⁱ

In other words, a slight majority of us. Ranging from snappish to vaguely sad to immobilized with grief.

I offer that not to sadden or upset you, but as insight as to why you may be feeling the way you do just now, or why those around you might seem so difficult or withdrawn or demanding or otherwise failing to live into what you may know as their best selves.

You know, every year at this time I read a short story by the American writer Jean Stafford. “Children are Bored on Sunday.” It’s a bleak midwinter story. It’s also a Valentine’s Day story, first published in *The New Yorker* issue of February 14, 1948.

It takes place in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and its two characters, Emma and Alfred, are two twenty-somethings who know each other vaguely, encounter each other in the museum on a Sunday, and have each been living through traumas and confinements which Stafford doesn’t need to detail.

What she focuses on instead is the awkwardness and the pains they take to avoid each other before their paths bring them together. Here is how Stafford describes Alfred and Emma’s meeting:

He took her hand and gravely asked her where she had been all this year and how she happened to be here, of all places, of all days. Emma replied distractedly, looking at his seedy clothes, his shaggy hair, the green cast of his skin, his deep black eyes, in which all the feelings were disheveled, tattered, and held together only by the merest faith that change had to come. Alfred’s hand was warm and her own seemed to cling to it and all their mutual necessity seemed centered here in their clasped hands.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mid-winter.

Dishevelled, tattered, and held together only by the merest faith that change *had* to come.

We find ourselves just now, I think, mid-pandemic. In the tattered middle. And indicators are mixed. Vaccines are rolling out, but not quickly enough or efficiently enough. A new administration offers the federal guidelines that have been almost murderously absent from our collective life as Americans, and at the same time we worry about new virus variants and their capacity to undermine our progress. Families are tentatively making plans for delayed weddings and reunions, while at the same time mindful of loved ones who’ve been taken from us, of lost incomes, of shuttered businesses and dried-up income streams. Or mindful maybe of that particular restaurant,

now permanently closed, where the food was so good and the now unemployed staff was so welcoming and where we began, in another season, to fall in love.

It's hard to be in the middle of something, in the bleak mid-winter.

And in the middle this morning is exactly where Mark's gospel has landed us. On the Sunday of the Transfiguration. In fact, if Mark's gospel were a single bound volume, and you were to open it to its central spread, here is where you would find yourself. With Jesus and James and John on a peak scholars identify either as Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon.

And in the very **middle** of their story.

Mark's gospel is beloved, and sometimes understood as the roughest, the least sophisticated, the least poetic of the four. A kind of crude first draft. The story the church hands us, this morning, though, is layered and powerful. It's where everything turns.

The public ministry of Jesus, as relayed by Mark, has until this mountain top moment been one of stunning ascent. The crowds have been huge throughout Galilee. The healings, the feedings. This is how a Messiah should look and feel.

So six days earlier, when Jesus spoke instead of a cross, of taking up a cross, of sacrificial love, Peter took issue with that. And who could possibly blame Peter for being confused? That confusion carries in to this morning's gospel.

Peter wants to build three booths. His impulse is to glorify, to commemorate, to freeze the moment. In our own time, perhaps he'd ask everyone to pull in so he could take a selfie to post. His understanding of Messiah is all about a crown. And what Jesus is presenting across these chapters is the cross, the white robe understood not as supremacy but as the color of the martyrs.

Moses embodies the Law. Elijah embodies the prophets. And Jesus standing with them embodies the sacrificial love soon to radiate from his own cross.

The Law. The Prophets. And the Cross. Mark shows us these three in this mountaintop moment.

It's a mid-section moment. A hinge moment. Israel's past and Israel's future. There is a new way to be human. It's embodied in the human shape of the cross.

Mark's transfigured Jesus, robed in white for only a moment, also looks ahead to the white cloth of the Easter tomb. The abandoned and by-then-useless death shroud. Not the shade of supremacy. Not the color of political triumph. But the hue of sacrificial love. New life is **this** way, telegraphs this mountaintop Jesus.

And for all the world it is going to look like downward mobility. Like a kind of surrender. So! Shall we head down?

And by the way, he tells them, perhaps with a particular focus on Peter, “Don't promote this.” Don't use this experience to signal your own virtue. Don't reduce this to an anecdote. Because the last thing we need right now is popularity or power. These will only puff us up and distract us. What authority we **can** claim has to do with our love, and **not** our capacity to control.

Our love, and not our capacity to control.

You know, it's often said of Peter and the other apostles, particularly as shown to us in Mark, that “they just don't get it.” But who among us, absent two-thousand years of hindsight, **would** get it? Peter's impulse – to build the booths, to glorify rather than to follow and listen – sometimes draws forth our patronizing and vaguely judgmental responses.

But Peter is in the middle of something. As we, beloved friends, are in the middle of something. In the bleak midwinter. And who understands anything in the middle?

Sometimes we are held together only by the conviction that change has to come.

And Jesus asked Peter then, as he continues to ask us now, to attach our hope to something we are often and understandably incapable of understanding rationally: *That God is with us.*

That a new world is breaking in if we can only trust in it. That God’s invitation to each of us stands: that we each may be transfigured.

Now, perhaps like me, you were tempted on the very last day of this last year, 2020, to burn your calendar. To reduce the year to ash.

But what if we were to think of 2020 and our own current “in-between” time not as endings, not as descents, but as a mountaintop time in which we were shown something, as the terrified apostles were shown something, and were transfigured by what we saw?

“My daddy changed the world!” proclaimed a 6-year old Gianna Floyd, sitting on the shoulders of her father’s friends after her father, George Floyd, was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer.^{iv}

Will you pray and proclaim with her? And commit to change yourself:

“We will move heaven and earth” to end this pandemic, promises our president.^v Will you move and pray and proclaim with him?

What many bereft people come to learn is that shock and trauma and loss can often break us open. Can often make us new.

“We’re all in this together” has become a trope of this time of trial.

To which the Prophet Isaiah would add “And we will all be changed.”

Transfigured.

Let us pray, again, the collect for this morning in the middle:

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.

ⁱ For more information on this hymn and Rosetti, see [In the Bleak Midwinter | Hymnary.org](#)

ⁱⁱ For more information on the Kaiser research, see [Mental Health an Emerging Crisis of COVID Pandemic \(webmd.com\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Yorker* offers the full text of Stafford’s story free to all at [“Children Are Bored on Sunday,” by Jean Stafford | The New Yorker](#)

^{iv} [George Floyd’s daughter Gianna: ‘Daddy changed the world’ \(usatoday.com\)](#)

^v <https://apnews.com/3d8d5841bb9098a81ad9452fb2619024>