

## BLESSED

Exodus 24: 12, 15-18  
2 Peter 1: 16-19 (20-21)  
Matthew 17: 1-9

[The last Sunday after Epiphany—The Transfiguration of our Lord,  
18 February 1999, American Lutheran Church, Sun City, Arizona]

I don't know about you, but the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, which we hear every year on the last Sunday of Epiphany, has always struck me as a bit of an affront to my early 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities.

It seems a bit like a magic show. Just imagine the scene: Jesus, with Peter, James, and John, praying together on a hill, and all of a sudden, Jesus is glowing. His face and his clothes are dazzling white. And then you look up and there are Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus. Peter's response to all this is to offer to build shelters for the prophets—one way to keep busy in the midst of the spectacle, we might guess. To top it all off, there suddenly appears a bright cloud in the heavens and a voice speaks to the assembled. This is all the disciples can handle. They fall to the ground in fear, only to wake up with Jesus' kind words to get up and be not afraid. And finally, Jesus orders the disciples to tell no one about this vision. I wonder if anyone would have believed them.

We can read the story this way and we often do, passing it off as the wild fantasies of a prescientific time. Or, we can look more closely at and realize just what Matthew may have been telling us when he wrote his gospel. We can recognize how the transfiguration sets the stage for the liturgical season of Lent we are about to enter.

Let us look at the central moment in the gospel: when God speaks. The heavens open and the voice proclaims to all whom have ears to hear: "This is my son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" There is the message. The gathering of the prophets, Moses and Elijah, with Jesus on this hill, is all about God's love for his children, now about to be lived out in the ultimate, saving act of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Listen to my Son, the Beloved, God says.

It's about being beloved. That is the gospel to be proclaimed today. My beloved, my Son, Jesus Christ. God's love for us, made known in his only son, sent to die for our sins. We are beloved. You are beloved. How about that for a Valentine's Day message?

So what does it mean to be beloved? The late Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest, teacher, and author, has said that the greatest

gift we can be given is to be beloved and to have someone help us know what it means to be beloved. He points out that this is especially important in a world filled with loud and persistent voices that tear us down, hurt us, reject us. And with all that tearing down and hurting and rejection, we begin to believe that we are not worthy of being beloved. And that is what God offers us through his grace and mercy; the free, unconditional love that calls us out of the sin and pain of this world, and says, “You are my beloved, on you my favor rests.” What a wonderful gift. Do you hear the voice calling you?

In order to understand what it means to be beloved, I turn once again to Father Nouwen, who offers four steps to accepting that God loves us, that we are his beloved. They are four important parts of Christian life, clearly supported by our scripture readings for this Transfiguration Sunday.

The first step is to accept the fact that we are called or chosen to be God’s beloved children. Moses accepted the call in our reading from Exodus: The Lord says, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there.” And that is what Moses did.

It is not easy to hear the call or accept that we are chosen. Especially in contemporary American culture, we don’t tend to trust what we hear. There is lots of static in the air, lots of offers and invitations that don’t pan out, opportunities that look good but ultimately hurt us. If you hear something, who’s to tell that it isn’t just some crank call? And we don’t want to risk too much of ourselves.

I don’t want to underestimate how hard accepting the call can be, even for the most faithful among us. But God does call and we must learn to listen, even with all the distractions around us. A few rules might help. First keep looking for the truth of God’s love even when the world tells you otherwise. For God’s people, the truth is in the gospel and in our life together. Reject the world’s temptation to give in to the hurt and pain by holding fast to God’s faithful words of love and hope. Second, look to people and places that remind you of the truth of God’s call. Here, in this congregation, you will find such people. In the stories of the church throughout history, the great saints and leaders comfort and strengthen us. On this Sunday, just days after Valentine’s Day, be reminded by the love you share with a spouse or a child or a special friend that your love for each other is a reflection of God’s love for us. Accept the call, know that you are chosen as beloved.

The second step in becoming beloved is to accept the ways we are blessed in our lives. This is such a rich concept. Blessings are all around us. The word blessing comes from the Latin benedicere, which literally means “speaking well of someone.” We are blessed at

various times in our formal worship service. But what about the blessings that we give and receive everyday in our lives? Parents bless their children by saying good things about and to them. Teachers bless students. Husbands and wives bless each other. To be blessed is to call out the goodness in each other. God blesses us and he sends us forth to bless his people.

But again, we live in a world where blessings must compete with lots of noise and hate. We must watch and listen carefully for the blessings we receive. Perhaps they come through a special poem or prayer or reading. WE are blessed because we hear the words of goodness in the text. We are blessed when we are present to and for each other. This is not always about saying something; it may simply be the touch or the sitting with someone quietly or walking together through the neighborhood, enjoying the blessing of presence. By being with me, you have blessed me.

The third step in becoming beloved is to accept our sinful and lonely selves. We all know how difficult that is. It is to admit that we have failed, that we have doubts about ourselves, that we don't get along with everyone, that we get lonely and depressed at times, that we can be tired and cranky and impatient. It is absolutely crucial to accept the fact that our sin is part of who we are. Being a Christian, saved through the gift of faith, we are not relieved of the sinful parts of our lives. Our sin is truly ours and we must accept that. And this sin and loneliness manifests itself in all parts of our individual and social lives. In everything from our broken hearts to national scandals to terrible wars in Kosovo. We are broken.

What do we do, then, when our sinful nature threatens to overcome our understanding and experience of being beloved? First, we must learn to befriend our sin, not avoid it, which often is our normal response. Take on the pain, find the good in it, have the courage to embrace your brokenness. Hard stuff – just think of all the times you've truly suffered over a lost friend, a broken relationship, a failure in your work—you know how tough it is to face that hurt and pain and find any good in it, but we must. And the way we might find the strength and courage and faith to face our sin is to turn to the blessings we have received. Cover the sin and pain with the blessings. I remember quite vividly when I was going through a divorce several years ago and feeling all the pain and anguish it caused me, the kind words and support of a couple of close friends—they blessings they offered—gave me the strength to get through. I found the blessing in the midst of the brokenness, and that made all the difference. We are broken and sinful, but we are also blessed. Accept both pain and the blessing.

And finally, to be beloved is to be given over (to be a gift, you might say)—to God, to others, to ourselves—as gifts, we learn what it means to be beloved. For as we live as gifts—in relationships, in communities, at work, in our families, in our church—we manifest what it means to be chosen, blessed, and sinful. We give away those parts of ourselves that are truly gifts to others. Jesus, the Beloved Son of God, gave over his call, his blessing, and his brokenness on the cross, and in him, we truly know the wonder of being beloved. In our lives as the faithful people of God, we too are charged to give ourselves over. We must give our lives, our talents, our gifts of friendship, kindness, trust, hope, and love. Ultimately, of course, we also must give ourselves over in death—that is perhaps the greatest challenge, the challenge Jesus took up on the cross. And because he has made that ultimate gift for us, we live in the assurance that we are beloved and that we shall live forever with him. What a remarkable gift!

My beloved friends, as we prepare to enter the blessed season of Lent, we are wise to listen to the words of Peter once again: “So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” In the transfiguration of our Lord, we have found favor with God.