

## Transfiguration

There is a lot going on in this passage today.

To get a handle on it, let's look at it through the eyes of the disciples, especially Peter.

At this point, the disciples have been with Jesus for about three years. They have struggled to get what Jesus is really about, but gradually, it's beginning to dawn on them who Jesus really is.

From the time of Israel's exile, the prophets and other religious teachers have taught about this Messiah that God promised. The Jewish people in Jesus' day were eagerly for that Messiah...for God's chosen king...to appear.

When the Messiah appeared, it would mean freedom for the Jewish people. It would mean they would be free of Roman oppression. They would be free of the tax burden Rome put on them to finance their military and building projects.

They would be free of the gruesome sight of accused traitors hung on crosses to die.

They would be free of Roman soldiers policing their cities at the time of festivals.

And they would be once again restored as God's chosen people.

Peter has just made this daring claim that Jesus is God's promised Messiah. But Peter...and everyone else...had a particular image of what that meant. In that image, this Messiah would become king and rule over Israel in the way kings always had achieved power. By defeating Israel's enemies...through war.

The idea that Jesus was this promised Messiah had to be exciting. But so far, Jesus hadn't done much to get ready. There was no army and the training of the disciples had clearly been for a mission of a different sort.

Peter had no other way to imagine how else it could work.

So he's thinking, yes I was right! Jesus is the one! Maybe now we'll get things rolling. But then, Jesus went totally off script.

The son of man would not raise an army...instead, he would be handed over to be tortured and killed. And then he would rise again.

Of course none of that made sense in Peter's eyes...and he maybe didn't even hear the rise again part.

Honestly, this whole scene had to have just left Peter, James and John deeply confused. First, they find out they're right, Jesus is the Messiah.

But then they learn he'll be killed.

Peter knows that can't be right. So he tries to set Jesus straight. He was dead convinced that he and the other disciples could keep that from happening.

Turns out, they're not even supposed to try – that's the human way....the way of the world.

And not only that, but this whole take up your cross business sounded like the same thing might happen to the disciples.

This...is no way to run a revolution.

Then, they go up on a high mountain, and this whole transfiguration thing happens. What the heck?!

At this point, for the disciples, there's no place in their brains for any grasp of resurrection.

But of course we who know the rest of the story can see this as a partial glimpse, not only of Jesus' resurrection, but of the end of the present age and the establishment of God's rule over all creation.

After this part of the story, Jesus, and the disciples, turn towards Jerusalem. This roller coaster is far from finished. There will be the highs of Jesus' triumphal entry and Jesus clearing the Temple of corruption.

Then there will be the lows of arrest, a sham trial, and crucifixion.

But then resurrection...ascension...Pentecost. Being a follower of Jesus is always a roller coaster.

So, what do we do with this story?

Well, the reality is we'll end up on the same roller coaster. The idea of taking up our own cross is no less scary now. A cross just doesn't seem safe.

Had Jesus been a traditional king, he would have made people feel safer. A strong, powerful king with a well-equipped well-trained army would make people feel safe. That might be what people were hoping for, at least a little bit, from the Messiah.

Instead, Jesus makes it pretty clear that following him will not be safe. Living out the gospel...the real gospel of self-denying love...means that comfort and even safety fall by the wayside. And it started early on.

James - one of the disciples with Jesus on the mountain top was beheaded by King Herod 30 years after this scene. That event is mentioned in the book of Acts.

It's believed that most of the disciples died as martyrs. Many Christians in the early church did.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer died a martyr's death standing up to the powers of Nazi Germany.

Archbishop Oscar Romero died a martyr's death for speaking out against poverty and injustice in El Salvador.

Martin Luther King, Jr. died a martyr's death for standing up to racial injustice.

Thousands of civil rights activists who worked with Dr. King suffered beatings, dog attacks, and prison for their work.

All of those are examples of taking up a cross. Being a disciple of Jesus isn't supposed to be safe. Being a disciple means being willing to take risks for the well-being of others.

Most of you know that the Nebraska National Guard at Camp Ashland housed 57 Americans and their families who live and work in China. They stayed there for two weeks while they were under quarantine for their potential exposure to Coronavirus.

When the word was first out, the initial reaction of at least a handful of people was fear...fear that they'd be exposed.

Contrast that to experience in the early church. In the second century, a deadly epidemic spread throughout the empire. Many people who could afford to fled the cities where exposure was most likely...they even left behind sick loved ones to avoid getting infected.

The Christians did not leave. They stayed. They not only took care of their own sick family and friends, but they also took care of the sick family and friends who were not Christian. Not too surprisingly, people who had someone to care for them were more likely to survive.

But some of the Christians died from the infection. That's what taking up a cross looks like.

Now, the risk from the people quarantined at Camp Ashland was virtually nil – all the precautions that could reasonably be taken were.

There were several churches who reached out wanting to know how they could help. Early on, Camp Carol Joy Holling was considered as a location, and the staff and board were willing. Those Christians were willing to take up the cross, even if it was a tiny one.

But there were still others who responded with fear. We in the church are called to not fear. If we are more focused on our own safety than the well-being of others, we've missed the boat on this whole take up the cross thing.

I'm concerned that our need for absolute safety in this country makes us unavailable to take up a cross for the sake of others.

Taking up a cross can be scary.

But on the other side, there's more. On the other side of Jesus' terrible prediction is this glorious image of the transfiguration.

On the other side of the cross is the resurrection.

It is a roller coaster. Taking up our cross can be at the minimum inconvenient and uncomfortable. To take up some cause and lay aside our obsession with self and our need for safety can come with great risk... in some cases we could even die.

But then, on the other side, is this image of glory...the image of God's reign coming in power to rule over heaven and earth. We see that in that reign, Christ has conquered death. We need not fear it. Taking up a cross is in fact how God's reign...God's kingdom...comes to us.

Probably most of us will not be given a cross of true martyrdom. But anytime we put aside our own self-interest or comfort for the sake of another, we've taken up our cross.

We've take up our cross when we've spent time with a lonely neighbor or relative who drives us crazy and we'd rather avoid.

When we've reacted to anger and rudeness with kindness

When we've stood up for a person or group of people who have been persecuted or bullied.

When we build houses and do mission work for no personal gain – not even self-satisfaction.

When we walk with someone in their suffering when we'd rather walk away and not think about suffering...or death.

All of those experiences are crosses. But on the other side, remember this image from today...Jesus on the mountaintop, giving us a glimpse of the day when God's reign comes in

power and love. Remember this glimpse that tells us Christ has conquered death. We need not fear it.

We need not fear anything.