

Sermon for Sunday February 19, 2023
Transfiguration Sunday
Matthew 17:1-9
Janelle Lightbourne

Grace and peace to you from God, our Holy parent. My name is Janelle Lightbourne and I am a seminary student at Martin Luther University College. I am also a candidate for ordination in the Eastern Synod and am currently serving as an intern at St. Philip's Lutheran Church in Etobicoke. I am originally from the Bahamas and moved to Canada in 2005 for university. I am also a Black woman.

Since I was 10 years old, I have been aware of and have had experiences of racism. This has made me acutely aware of how racism and white supremacy affect BIPOC (Black Indigenous and people of color) communities, the structures of our society, and our church. I also do my best to lean into the hope that we carry collectively - hope for a future where we all live in safety and are treated with dignity and respect.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this week and especially during Black History Month--a time when we celebrate the contributions people of African descent have made to Canadian culture and invigorate our ongoing work of racial justice.

I made a concerted effort to write this sermon in a neutral voice. However, I understand that the concerns presented here may cause some discomfort, especially if your experiences are very different from mine. This is ok. I ask you to deliver the sermon as is and see this as an opportunity to sit with another person's experiences and explore any discomfort that arises. Know that God is with you.

With peace and love,

Janelle

The conversation within the Black community around what kinds of images and adjectives are used to portray and describe people of the African diaspora is ever evolving. It has been interesting to see it develop. Perhaps this conversation evolves so readily because of the heavy stereotypes that exist, shaping a narrative of Black people as comical, lazy, loud, and thuggish. These images are hard to witness especially when folks who identify as Black are aware of their own diversities and complexities. There is a pressing need to use self-reflective descriptors and write authentic narratives. This need is balanced with the struggle of knowing how to portray Black culture and identity in a way that best captures a full range of emotions and experiences.

In part, the work of reshaping this narrative has come in response to the overwhelming amounts of negative images of Black people in the media, (especially images of Black men who are victims of police brutality). And so, to counter the negativity and fill out the narrative, images of victims in a graduation cap and gown or pictures of them smiling and laughing while holding their children are widely shared and promoted. Recall the picture of George Floyd, who was murdered by police in 2020 holding up a Bible with his Bible study group, shared in answer to the videos and photos of him on the ground struggling to breathe.

This year, there has been an influx of pictures of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife and co-laborer Coretta Scott King, not on the front lines of marches with stoic expressions, but on the beach, lounging by the pool, laughing together and relaxing. A statue in honor of the Kings was unveiled in Boston in January. The creator, Hank Willis Thomas drew inspiration for the statue from a photograph that was taken of the couple after Rev. King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In the photo, both of Rev. King's arms are wrapped around Mrs. King in a tight hug. She has her eyes closed and both are smiling widely, looking proud and joyful, almost playful. Aptly, the statue is called "The Embrace".

It seems that this statue, 'The Embrace', and the photograph that inspired it are a part of this evolving conversation. There are more and more voices inviting others to see all the different parts of a Black person's experience--the joy and the hardships--and regardless of the image, to still see that person as a beloved human being deserving of respect and dignity. The art piece has received mixed reviews but the artist made his

point clear. In his own words, the statue is 'about the capacity for each of us to be enveloped in love'.

At the transfiguration, God gives the disciples and the Matthean church a fuller vision of who Jesus is. We don't have any definite answers on the purpose of this event or this text, but there are many explanations that help us make sense of this story. A lot of these explanations focus on the disciples, Peter, James and John and the original hearers of the text.

Matthew's community was experiencing much suffering and conflict with the Roman Empire and amongst themselves and needed a reminder of the resurrected Christ who they were following. In our text, we read that Jesus climbs up a high mountain with Peter, James and John and there on this mountain by themselves, Jesus is "transfigured before them." His face and clothes shine. He is awe-inspiring and brilliant. Jesus radiates light and Jesus *is* light.

It is posited that for the disciples and this first century community, this image of Jesus in his radiant glory was to be an image that stayed with them as they endured their hardships. The words "This is my Son, the Beloved...listen to him!" affirmed their belief in Jesus as the Messiah and recommitted them to a life of obedience to Jesus. The transfiguration was a source of hope and strength to keep following and walking in the way of Jesus in spite of the trouble.

Reading this text in light of Black History Month, however, invites us to wonder what purpose the transfiguration served *for Jesus*. Before the transfiguration, Jesus had been going about his ministry as usual--preaching, healing, being tested by the religious leaders and misunderstood by his own disciples. Matthew 16:21 tells us that Jesus began to show his disciples another part of his experience and share a bit more of what his road ahead was going to look like: he was going to Jerusalem. He would suffer at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes. He would be killed and raised back to life. Even though Peter gets his confession right that Jesus is the Messiah, he still doesn't fully understand what his confession means for Jesus. Jesus' experience--what he knew about himself and his journey--goes unheard and is denied.

Perhaps Jesus himself needed a space where all the different parts of his identity and his experience could be fully seen and acknowledged--a space where he was reminded that he was beloved. The transfiguration offered him that.

Up until this point, the disciples and his community had known him as a teacher, a healer and even a prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah. To be sure, each of these is a role that Jesus fills, but none *alone* captures his full identity.¹ On the mountaintop, every part of Jesus' identity was on display in front of God, his Holy Parent who knew him through and through and on display in front of his most trusted disciples. Perhaps the words of affirmation, spoken by God "This is my son, the beloved in whom I am well pleased" were Jesus' own much-needed source of strength and hope.

And after a short moment of glory and radiance, the world went back to what it was. No prophets of old. No audible divine voice. No light emanating from Jesus' face. The world has gone back to what it was but the disciples cannot return to their same old image of Jesus.² They have been changed into a community that would be able to hold onto Jesus' radiance and his glory even while they walked the long road to Jerusalem. As they descended, they carried the seeds of a community that would be able to see that this radiance was also a part of who Jesus was and even as the glory faded, see that Jesus was *still* glorious and beloved regardless of his suffering, his circumstances or what he looked like.

Glorious on the mountain and in the valley. Glorious as he begged for a different path on his knees in the garden of Gethsemane, glorious as he suffered on the cross, glorious as he laid in the tomb, glorious in the garden as the risen Christ.

Let's imagine how Jesus felt even for the short while that he was on that mountain. Did he have a sense of safety and wholeness? Vulnerability? Was he relieved? Understood? We cannot say what Jesus' exact experience was, but we know that these kinds of safe spaces are what we all long for and deserve. We all want to be in relationships and communities where no part of us needs to be hidden, where we can be fully known and still counted as glorious and beloved.

¹ Audrey West, 2008, Commentary on Matthew 17:1-9.

² Eric Barreto, 2020, Commentary on Matthew 17:1-9.

For many Indigenous people, Black folks and People of Color, (BIPOC) these kinds of spaces are few and far between. This is especially true in Canada where Indigenous and Black communities experience marked disadvantages in employment, housing and home ownership, and education and where they are grossly overrepresented in prisons and the criminal justice system.

The response to this kind of environment is to split and hide away parts of the self, not because of a lack of confidence, fortitude or self-understanding. This hiding or more aptly, safe-keeping of one's personhood is done in order to survive in a society that creates these very real inequities. Perhaps you have heard of code switching where members of marginalized groups (often unconsciously) change the way they talk, dress, and act in order to make others feel comfortable. This is done in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities.³ Scholar and civil rights activist W.E.B. Dubois describes code switching as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels [their] two-ness...two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."⁴

This is *exhausting*. And it invites us all to ask - Where are the spaces where BIPOC can feel some relief from this hiding? And even if the ideal of being fully understood is not realized, where can BIPOC simply be safe and whole? Are our churches that safer space and community? Can they be?

My siblings, God is continuously creating safe spaces for those who need them most. These are spaces where each person's voice is valued, where folks apologize and are held accountable when wrongs inevitably occur, where we are all allowed to be ordinary and messy and still be treated as beloved.

I hope you hear in these words today a deep need and an invitation to be a safer space. May we be *or become* communities where folks who are on the margins can turn their code switchers off for just a little while. May we hear the call of the transfiguration to look and listen and to acknowledge light where we did not see it before. May we truly

³ Harvard Business Review, *The Costs of Code Switching*, 2019.
<https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-costs-of-codeswitching>

⁴ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

see each other and name each other glorious and beloved as we continue to walk with God on the long road of wholeness and liberation. Amen.