

Sermon: Transfiguration - Remembering with humility

Text: Luke 9: 28 – 36

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As I looked over the sermons that I have preached on transfiguration over my years at Saint Catherine's. Two themes struck me – Remembering. And Humility.

Remembering.

The indigenous people of the America's (or Turtle Island), have a particular affection for sweetgrass.

It is sacred.

In their tradition it was the very first plant to grow on Mother earth and its fragrance is a sweet memory.

One woman writes: "Breathe in its scent and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten"

The scent of Sweetgrass evokes sacred stories.

Stories about human origins, reordering what is important in life, what needs to be valued.

Remembering.

I wonder how we remember.

Is it times of silence where we close our eyes and listen to our heart beats.

Is it the beauty of creation – a sunset, the call of a bird.

Is it a particular song?

Is it the taste of bread and the smell of wine?

Is it the sound of a familiar prayer said in unison?

The things that call us to remember... like sweetgrass...

Gathers together ideas and our stories of what is important in life.

The first disciples climbed a mountain with Jesus, and they remembered.

Peter, James and John were rooted in the stories of Torah (the Jewish scriptures),

And climbing a mountain evoked memory. It was like sweetgrass.

Australian professor Rikk Watts spent his career researching the ways that New Testament writers brought merged their Jewish stories with their memories of Jesus.

And Luke chapter 9 is a great example.

Jesus had just rocked their world.

He delivered the shocking news that he was about to be rejected and suffer death at the hands of the authorities.

The disciples had expected a messiah, a saviour, a Moses, an Elijah... not a rejected, suffering leader.

And so... Jesus takes them up a mountain.

A mountain. A mountain.

Mountains are evocative places.

And particular for those who had a Jewish identity.

They Remembered:

- (1) "Abraham! Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the **Mountain of Moriah**, and offer him there as a burnt offering."

A controversial difficult moment in history.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God..."

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram and he took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"

Memories of the Mountain of Moriah.

They remembered the Exodus:

- (2) As the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. There Israel camped in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up **Mount Sinai** to God;:"

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after."

Later, when ²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai... the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

Memories of the Mountain of Sinai.

Later in the era of the Kings...

- (3) You will remember the prophet Elijah on the **Mountain of Horeb**.

"Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, he was told, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind;

and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹²

and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire;

and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice in a whisper, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Memories of the Mountain of Horeb.

Now here, Jesus stands with James, Peter and John on a Mountain.

It floods them with memories:

- Mount Moriah: The Lord shall provide like he did for Abraham and Sarah
- Mount Sinai: I will come in a cloud, trust the one whose face shines like Moses
- Mount Horeb: Listen to me when I call, just like he whispered to Elijah.

And the disciples respond by offering to build three dwellings or booths.
A ritual they did every year to remember the Exodus and wilderness time.

The memory and ritual is so powerful that Luke uses the Greek word for “Exodus”.
Here translated departure.

Oh how those first disciples longed for a new Exodus.

For the pain and trauma in a Roman Palestine to be over. They were waiting for their rescue.
And hoping against all hopes, that Jesus would be their new Moses, their Elijah.

And so, the Mountain was like sweetgrass.

They remembered things they didn’t know they’d forgotten.

It became a way for them to remember to remember.

John O Donnehue writes in his well-known book, Anam Cara, that memory is one of the most beautiful realities of the soul.

He says that the computer industry has ‘hacked’ the notion of memory.

To say that computers have memory is false. A computer has storage and recall.

Humans have memory – it is refined, sacred and personal.

It has its own selectivity and depth, feeling and sensibility.

Our memory serves us well.

We relish it, we are comforted by it.

We share our memories with others.

And we are transformed by it.

The way things have been in the past, are often transferred onto the future:

Our memories often determine the way we think things ought to be.

But Memory, especially the memory of Jesus is transformative.

Jesus said to his disciples... I am not who you expect me to be.

I am going to be rejected and die.

But their memories clouded their ability to take this in.
They wanted a Moses, they wanted an Elijah.
The mountain evoked these memories.

Yet a voice broke through that urges them to listen, to really listen to what Jesus is saying.

And Jesus repeats his words:

“Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” I am not Moses, I am not Elijah.

Theologian John Caputo writes that...

The first disciples were expecting one event, an event to end all events, but they got another. Which really was a disappointment.

He goes on to say that...

Jesus is too often a mirror in which we behold our own image.
The things we remember.
The victories, the honour, the successes, the times when ‘everybody is a Christian’...

John Caputo reminds us that just like Jesus disrupted the pattern in Israel’s constructed history...

So it is for the church.

The structure of church is a provisional structure in the history of Christianity.
Whatever has taken place in the form of church... Christ can disrupt.

This is the dangerous memory of Jesus.

A Jesus that disrupts. A Jesus that will surprise us with another way.

And sometimes it is good for us to listen to a perspective other than our own. To try on difference.

The African American author **Cole Arthur Riley** in her book: *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation and the stories that make us*.

Warns us against mountain top memories.

In the chapter, entitled “wonder”, she writes:

“When I speak of wonder, I mean the practice of beholding the beautiful.
Beholding the majestic—the snow-capped Himalayas, the sun setting on the sea—
but also the perfectly mundane—that soap bubble reflecting in your kitchen, the oxidized underbelly of that stainless steel pan.

More than the grand beauties of our lives, wonder is about having the presence to pay attention to the commonplace.

It could be said that to find beauty in the ordinary is a deeper exercise than climbing to the mountaintop.

When people or groups become too enamored with mountaintops, we should ask ourselves whether their euphoria comes from love or from the experience of supremacy.

Being born of an appetite not for flourishing but for domination, [we often] love the ascent, the conquering. It will tell you about the view from there, but be assured that it is only its view of itself that rouses its spirit. It is about bravado and triumph.

There is nothing wrong with climbing the mountain, but bravado tends to drown out the sound of wonder. Perhaps you've known that person who devours beauty as if it belongs to them. It is a possessive wonder.

It eats not to delight but to collect, trade, and boast. It consumes beauty to grow in ego, not in love.

It climbs mountains to gain ownership, not to gain freedom.

To encounter the holy in the ordinary is to find God in the liminal—in spaces where we might subconsciously exclude it, including the sensory moments that are often illegibly spiritual.

- Cole Arthur Riley

Friends - Remember with humility.

Amen