

Last Sunday of after the Epiphany (Year A) – Matthew 17:1-9
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Transfiguring Life

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Do you ever wonder how Peter has the nerve to say anything in the midst of this awesome scene? Not only is Jesus transfigured and shining, but he's talking with Moses and Elijah. Wouldn't you expect Peter to be stunned and speechless in this situation? But perhaps that's an introvert's perspective. Rather than process things internally over time, Peter blurts out the first thing that comes to his mind. And it's not exactly as inappropriate a response as some biblical scholars have suggested. If we take another look at the event, we might notice that Peter is trying to make sense of an extraordinary situation by interpreting it based on his personal understanding and religious experience. Isn't that what most of us would do in new or unexpected circumstances? Offering to make a dwelling place for three holy people, two of whom Peter never expected to see in his lifetime, is actually one of the most logical and respectful things Peter could have offered.

In the Hebrew tradition, dwelling places were also known as tabernacles - portable meeting places where the Israelites would encounter God especially at the time of the Exodus from Egypt into the Promised Land. The tabernacle or "tent of meeting" was and is revered as a holy place, a

sanctuary where devout religious people gather to offer praise and thanksgiving to God, and seek divine guidance on our earthly journeys. For millennia, Jewish people have celebrated The Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths near harvest time during a weeklong holiday known as Sukkot. In contemporary times, Jewish people often celebrate Sukkot by building little booths made with palm branches, fruits and vegetables, and large sheets of cloth. The booths, called Sukkahs, are created in thanksgiving for God's divine presence and guidance through all the changes and chances of life.

I first learned about the celebration of Sukkot when my daughter was just beginning to read. Both of us enjoyed story time before bed. We loved snuggling next to each other and sharing the adventures that unfolded with each turn of the page. Being read to and learning to read are phases of life that transfigure us and transform us. We develop a love for reading and become deeply influenced by our favorite authors. One of my daughter's favorite childhood authors was Patricia Polacco. My mother first introduced us to Polacco's books, and we eventually looked forward to collecting many of her stories as they became available through the Scholastic Book Fairs. One of our favorite books was called *Tikvah Means Hope*. Not only was the book by one of our favorite authors, it had a cat on the cover!

Although a cat named Tikvah is a central character in the book, the storyline encourages readers reflect on the abundance and diversity of God's providence and the significance of dwelling places in our lives. The story takes place in Oakland, California during the festival of Sukkot. A Jewish family is beginning to build their make-shift Sukkah when brushfires spread into the Oakland hills. Instead of spending the night looking up at the stars through the palm branch roof, neighborhood children and their families have to be evacuated to a different kind of shelter. Rescue workers offer the community sanctuary and respite in the Oakland Tech gymnasium. In this temporary dwelling place people gather to share their hopes and fears along with basic necessities such as clean clothing, food and fresh water. Over the next few days vast areas of the Oakland hills were transfigured by the firestorm. More than 3400 homes were transformed to ashes and dust; 25 people lost their lives, including one firefighter; and numerous wildlife and family pets perished. In the children's storybook, Tikvah the cat miraculously does not perish and neither does one palm branch or piece of cloth on the Sukkah. The community returns to the location of their previous dwelling places and gathers to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles and together rebuild their lives with hope and faith.

When disaster strikes it can be difficult to experience God's light amidst the rubble. But my favorite childhood television storyteller reminds us that

God's love is always present. Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers Neighborhood encourages us to look for the helpers during times of tragedy or disaster. To not only look for God's love amidst life's suffering and hardship, but to be God's love by offering caring hands and compassionate hearts. Even when life isn't transformed by natural disasters, our lives can be forever changed when we collaborate as a community of hope. When we sit alongside children and encourage their love of reading and learning; when we share meals with neighbors who can't afford groceries; when we help strangers navigate the legal system; when we support homeless people in rebuilding their lives. I imagine that there are many stories within your hearts that are waiting to be shared; stories of how God's love has transfigured you from the inside out and outside in; When was the last time you shared one of those stories with someone?; a real life honest to goodness story of how God has changed your life forever? Perhaps you've found that Jesus transfigures your life with God's dazzling light at the most unexpected times. Or perhaps you've noticed that God is but a whisper nudging you nurture love in the hearts of your neighbors. Perhaps you've experienced the Holy Spirit washing over you as you reconnect with nature.

God promises to transfigure us not just once, or at significant times of our lives. God promises to transform our lives every day through the love of Jesus Christ as we engage in loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Over the next month or so, our congregation will be discerning how our church can be a beacon of hope alongside our neighbors who are struggling to survive amidst fear, hunger, and uncertainty at school, work, and home. By the church, I don't necessarily mean our buildings. I mean the church as the Body of Christ; our lives as living sanctuaries, shining forth as dwelling places of the Divine Holy One. The Transfiguration of Jesus was a mountaintop experience that helped shape the disciples understanding of who Jesus was and their relationship with him. But all of them had to come down from the mountain together and into the valley to more fully engage in God's mission and ministry; to be transfigured by God's love and transformed into the beloved community that God intends for all.

Lord, prepare us to be sanctuaries. Pure and holy. Tried and true. With thanksgiving, may we be living sanctuaries for you.

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