

Everything Under the Sun
Matthew 17:1-9
14 February 2021
sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae

One day, years ago, I remember my father coming into the house to find me, very excited, asking me if I would like to see the sun spots. My father, an astronomy buff had rigged his small telescope with a special lens so that we could look at the sun without burning our eyes. As I looked into the telescope I was amazed to see the spots; you would never imagine that the sun had so much variety on her face. These stormy spots, sometimes the size of Jupiter are caused by intense magnetic fields that occur, combined with the rotation of the sun. Sometimes they occur and sometimes they don't, but they are quite an amazing thing to see with your own eyes. And this isn't the only spectacular phenomenon that occurs on the sun. There is also something called "a coronal mass ejection," in which billions of tons of charged particles escape from the sun's corona and dump trillions of watts of power into Earth's upper atmosphere. This can overload power lines, causing massive blackouts, and destroy delicate instruments on satellites in Earth orbit. And intensify our brilliant northern lights. Although the sun has been burning for 4.6

billion years, it is only in the last two decades or so that scientists have begun to understand it. One thing is clear though, our sun is a very stormy star, existing with the tensions of life and huge upset. Source of our energy, connection to power. Heartbreak and agony, struggle and suffering, light and life and promise of tomorrow; just as all of these come together in the hot sun, these contradictory pieces all come together too in Jesus.

Today in our story of the Transfiguration we are told that Jesus' face shone like the sun. The theological and symbolic meaning of this passage is clear. As we prepare to begin our journey through the season of Lent, we are told that, like the sun, Jesus is the source of our light and our life, the centre of our life, the one who can lead us through our storms. It is an important reminder before Lent begins because this is a challenging time in our church year. This forty-day walk into the wilderness will bring us face to face with the depth of our lacking, our human frailty, and our sin. It will bring us to the cross, to the very worst the world could do to Jesus. But on the other side, is the new life, the promise of Easter.

The story of the Transfiguration is one that we are not really meant to understand until we find ourselves on the other side of Good

Friday, until we experience the joy of Easter morning and reflect on all that happened. Today, it is just a glimpse, it is a story that is as confusing and weird to us as it must have been to the disciples in the midst of it. What started out as an ordinary trek up a mountain turned into a life changing moment when the disciples began to see Jesus clearly. Like an astronomer gazing through a telescope, the disciples were given an unobstructed view of who Jesus is, the power and place of Jesus among the prophets and with God. We may never know exactly the experience they had, but one thing is clear, on that mountaintop they finally really began to understand.

Their first reaction was total fear, this was so different from their ordinary experience that they were afraid. And then, in what seems like a completely bizarre moment, Peter offer to build a house for Jesus and the prophets right there on the mountain. It seems absurd, but to cut Peter some slack he was only doing what seemed right, he was trying to show respect and trying desperately to put the event within the context of his human experience. He wanted to protect Jesus, he wanted to contain the power of God in one place so that others could come and experience it too. In his own way, despite his

fear, he didn't want the event to end, and he wanted others to be able to experience it too.

And they would, others would experience it, but not in the way the disciples thought, not in the way they had been raised to believe God would behave. Jesus was not a fiery ball of divine light who was content to stay on a mountain top away from his people, completely untouchable. As strange as the disciples experience was on that mountain top, as bizarre as the event seemed within their understanding, more bizarre events are about to occur as they travel with Jesus to Jerusalem and experience the events that we now know as Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter morning.

If the story of Good Friday and Easter were written like a novel, today's story of the transfiguration would be the preface, those few pages sometimes included before the chapters start that give the reader a taste of the excitement that is to come. Jesus face shines like the sun and he is surrounded by the respected and powerful prophets that went before him. The voice of God declares that Jesus is the son of God and then just as quickly as it all started Jesus reaches out and touches the disciples and tells them to not be afraid. And then it all fades away.

It is here that the preface would end and the actual story of the journey toward Good Friday would begin. With a simple, human touch and a few kind words the greatest power in the universe creates sacred holy ground between these friends, between us, between all of God's children. The image of the invisible God is seen in the face of a caring man. The source of all light and life on earth is revealed to be Jesus of Nazareth, the one who walks with us down the mountain, and stays with us through all our hardships, reminding us that God is with us, always with us, and that he will never let us go.

What a blessing as we prepare to enter Lent. What a blessing as we prepare for our second Lent in pandemic, as we live in a state of precarity, as we worry about the future, wait for vaccines, see the absolute best and absolute worst in the people around us. What a blessing, in a world filled with fear and uncertainty.

Get up and do not be afraid.

That is what the mightiest power in the universe says to us when we feel frightened by this pandemic, when we feel beaten up by the economic uncertainties of lockdown, soiled by our mistakes, and depressed by mental, physical or spiritual deterioration. "Get up,"

says Jesus. “I am offering you light and new life.” The incredible promise of the resurrection is that there is always new life to be found on the other side of suffering and death. “Do not be afraid,” counsels Jesus. “I am going to walk with you, and assure you of the presence of God in your life.” The greatest guarantee of Christ’s companionship is that nothing in all creation — no pain or crying, no virus or lockdown, no suffering or dying — can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And this is something we need to remember as we begin our journey through Lent, as we face the frustration of another Lent in pandemic, in precarity, as we face the despair of all of our own personal Good Fridays, those moments when our dreams seem crushed, when everything we know seems turned upside down. Today we are reminded that whatever may confront us further down the road, the love of God, come to us in Jesus Christ, will never fail us. Just when we think we have reached the end of the road, we will be surprised with a new beginning.

About twenty seven years ago there was a full eclipse of the sun. I must have been on holidays from university and was home visiting my parents who both had to go to work. Before he left for work my dad gave me two pieces of glass out of his welders mask

that he had taped together into one thick, seemingly impenetrable mask. With it I would be able to go outside and watch the entire eclipse, even at its most intense. I was a little dubious that I would be able to see anything through it, when I held the double thick welders glass up to the kitchen light I couldn't see a thing. "Trust me", he said, "it will work." And I did. As I noticed the light outside changing in that indescribable way it does when there is a full eclipse I went outside, guessed in the general direction where the sun should be, held up the glass to my eyes and looked. I could not believe what I saw as the shadow began to pass in front of the face of the sun.

It was absolutely incredible and mystical and even a little terrifying. I could imagine the horror that must have faced early humanity when such a phenomenon occurred. There are few things more frightening than seeing the sun dim in mid day. A primitive panic seems to creep up within you and I did have to remind myself that it was all ok. Once I got comfortable in the changing and ever darkening environment I jumped up on the hood of my car and leaned back against the front windshield and just kept looking up, through my welders mask. The most stunning sight was at the moment of full eclipse when all along the edges intensely bright light peaked out

from the edges of the blackness. I'd never seen anything like it, or seen anything like it since. I would look down, remove the mask and look at the world around me, enveloped in this strangely almost sickening dullness; not the prettiness of a sunset, but a disconcerting light, like something was dying. And then, unable to stand it anymore I would put the mask back on and look up at the covered sun and remind myself that it was still there, that beyond the dark shadow it was still shining along the edges. I stayed like that until I watched the shadow move away and reveal the full sun again.

My understanding of God always comes back to that experience on the hood of my car during a full solar eclipse. It was so much like God, like the light that shines through the panicky shadows of our life. And yet God is so much more. Like the sun that shines in our sky, there are things about God that we can begin to understand, and some that we just aren't ready to understand, some that we are not yet wise enough to understand. And for now, we must be content to live with that mystery. And until that time when we can fully see, may we be reassured and led through all of our personal storms by that voice that tells us not to be afraid, and the hope and promise of new beginnings, of shadows slipping away. May

we be encouraged with the hope that swirls around us, brought to life through the energy of Christ at the centre of our lives.