

February 26, 2017
2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

We are all looking for a neon sign... This is the story of one neon sign.

It happened *before* at Jesus' birth, when the angels sang out his glory from the skies above the stable. It happened *before* at Jesus' baptism – his ordination to ministry – when God called out, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased”. And it happened again here, toward the end of Jesus' life.

Jesus had traveled many miles and lived many stories at this point. He had healed people from blindness, saved children from demons, fed hungry crowds, and befriended the abandoned and unwanted. As he approached Jerusalem, he was thinking and talking about his coming death.

His disciples had traveled many miles with Jesus. They watched him heal and save and feed and befriend. Yet they still had questions. They wanted to understand, but even his simplest explanations were veiled in mystery.

This story brought Jesus to the top of a mountain with 3 of his disciples: Peter, James, and John. Away from the crowds and the other disciples, Jesus changed. He shone like the sun and his clothes dazzled white. His very body became a neon sign. Then Moses and Elijah joined them – certainly the top two heroes of the faith. This is the equivalent of Frank Sinatra inviting you to tea, only to be joined by Nat King Cole and Dean Martin. Or Picasso inviting you to a paint night with Monet and Michelangelo. Or Babe Ruth inviting you to play catch with Michael Jordan and Peyton Manning. Here we've got Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. These are the big three for the disciples. Moses and Elijah's presence brought a known and trusted authority. They underscored the significance of the occasion. Like arrows on the bottom of a neon sign, their presence said, “Pay attention to this!”

The disciples saw Jesus change before their eyes. **He** was transfigured. And the disciples themselves were changed by the encounter with God. **They** were transfigured and transformed. This was as much a piece of Jesus' own call as it was a call to the disciples. It wasn't about them, and yet they were transformed by this experience. Jesus' journey would be different after this. And their journey would be different after this.

Any lingering doubt must have disappeared when God's presence joined them in a bright cloud, saying "My Son. The Beloved. Well pleased. Listen." They had heard these spoken before at Jesus' baptism. But that was *before*. That was miles ago and years ago and before they had seen and heard all that they had. Now they heard these words with countless stories bearing witness to their meaning. Now they heard these words with clarity. Who was he? The Son of God. What had he done? Good work. Why had he done it? To please God. God's words reminded Jesus of his own call to ministry, and served as testimony of Jesus' true identity for the disciples.

The phrase "you'll understand when you get older" can't help but sound patronizing, but there is truth in the phrase. Some things you simply won't understand until you've gotten some life experience. You don't know what you don't know until you know it. You know?! ☺

So many miles ago, and likely several years prior, the disciples heard these words at Jesus' baptism. They decided to follow him down the road and into ministry. But they couldn't really know what they signed up for. They couldn't really understand what it meant to be the Son of God, or what the Messiah might do. Jesus himself may not have fully realized what was down the road. God's words on the mountaintop brought clarity to Jesus' sense of identity – a child of God. The Son of God. And the words carried a sense of belonging. This is God's own. God's beloved own. This one is loved. This one has purpose. This one is doing well by God.

This was an inoculation from the disease of sin and hate that would surround Jesus in his final days. People would continually question his identity. Friends and strangers alike would forsake him. People would mock him. But his identity would not change because of those things. He was God's Son, God's Beloved.

Like Jesus, the beginning of our Christian journey is marked by baptism. We don't know what doubts and challenges lie ahead of us. We don't know if we will stay in that particular congregation. With no guarantee that we will be the best Christian or an obedient disciple, God still calls us "child of God" while the baptismal waters wash over us. It becomes our primal identity. The waters then leaves soggy footprints as we walk through life. Our baptism follows us from birth to death and ultimate resurrection, so that the life of a baptized person is the journey to transfiguration. We are changed by God's claim on us. We are made unrecognizable by the glory shining around us. God's glory transfigures us. It prepares us. It strengthens us.

Baptism = first milestone. Other milestones through life. Each call changed me.

In a few minutes, we will ordain and install a new class of church officers. These are people whom you have called, "Beloved," and elected them to be your leaders for the next three years. Today is a milestone in their faith journey, and in our as witnesses. These folks will leave their former selves behind and begin a journey to an unknown destination. They will be changed – transformed – by their service. We will be changed by their service. There will be challenges ahead of us. There will be times of disagreement and frustration. Whatever may come, we rely on our identity as baptized children of God: created. Loved. Called. Thanks be to God! Amen.