SEVENTH SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY—*Transfiguration*

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Moving On”* Matthew 17:1-9

At this point in my life, I do not know how many times I have heard this passage read in worship, or have read it for myself in private or group Bible Study. What I do know is that as I began to study and plan this sermon, a few lines from an old song kept running around in my head.

I’m going to ask now, who, in here, if anyone, remembers the singing group, *The Rascals*?One of the songs that was a big hit for The Rascals in 1967 is a called, *There’s a Place in the Sun.* Throughout the piece the singer laments, but also reiterates, that he is “*movin’ on, movin’ on.”*

I looked up the song, these are the words:

*Like a long lonely stream I keep runnin’ towards a dream,
movin’ on, movin’ on.
Like a branch on a tree I keep reachin’ to be free,
movin’ on, movin’ on.
‘Cause there’s a place in the sun where there’s hope for ev’ry one,
where my poor restless heart’s gotta run.
There’s a place in the sun and before my life is done,
Got to find me a place in the sun.*

*Like an old dusty road
I get weary from the load,
movin’ on, movin’ on.
Like this tired troubled earth
I’ve been rollin’ since my birth,
movin’ on, movin’ on.
‘Cause there’s a place in the sun where there’s hope for ev’ry one,
where my poor restless heart’s gotta run.
Theres’ a place in the sun and before my life is done,
Got to find me a place in the sun.*

Somehow, that song kept speaking to me as I meditated on this passage…and perhaps, as we go on, I will help you see why.

One of the most important phrases in the passage that we heard is at the very beginning, and so much happens afterward that we almost forget that it is there. The phrase is this: *“Six days later,…”* [v.1a]—that’s it. This passage of time is an important part of what is about to happen because before it—six days earlier, in chapter 16—Jesus had begun to prepare Peter, James, John, and the rest of the disciples for what was going to happen to him. He had also begun to question them to see what they understood and how much. Therefore, he must have been relieved to hear Peter proclaim: “You are the Son of the Living God.” [16:16]

Yet on the very heels of that declaration, when Jesus had begun to share with them what was going to happen in Jerusalem, and how he was going to “*undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” [16:21]

Upon hearing that, Peter did a complete 180º-turn. Peter was not only surprised, he was offended. *‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’*[16:22], he cries.

Peter’s words and his indignation are not difficult for any of us to understand. Learning of a loved one’s death, or even the thought of their death is always painful—even when we believe we have been prepared for it. Our first reaction is usually like Peter’s—we do not want to believe this will or even *can* happen.

This is what the conversation and the heightened feelings had been between Jesus and the disciples just six days before this morning’s reading. Now, Jesus and the disciples—Peter in particular—have come to a better understanding of what is to come in his life and in the lives of all of them. Jesus has admonished Peter, and has helped him understand that Jesus’ life and his ministry is going to *“keep turnin’ towards”*—not just any dream, but God’s dream, God’s *vision*, for humanity and the real and lasting hope that God’s love can bring into our lives—if we only embrace it.

Jesus knows that the hope he wants the disciples to have has the ability to transform their lives. A hope born of God’s love can change the whole world.

In an effort to further prepare Peter, James and John to receive this vision, Jesus takes the three with him up a mountain. This should have been a clue for them that something special was going to happen because mountains are always a place of power in the Bible. Also, God usually calls people up onto a mountaintop for important meetings.

Unfortunately, Peter and the others do not seem to remember this and this is too bad because (sure enough) as soon as they get to the top, Jesus’ whole being is transformed before them. Suddenly, his hands and face and his clothes all look as if they were lit from within; as if Jesus has been turned into a being of light. Even in the sunlight, he was dazzling.

Before the disciples could come to grips with this, two others appear beside Jesus. Moses and Elijah—they stand with Jesus and begin to engage him in conversation.

In an instant, Peter, James, and John understand that Jesus really *is* the Christ. Peter had affirmed that belief in this just six days before, but it seems those were just words. Now, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, a new sense of Jesus’ authority sweeps over all three disciples.

Peter is stunned but comes to his senses enough to call Jesus’ attention away from Moses and Elijah, Can you imagine the audacity? He calls Jesus’ attention away from Moses and Elijah, to ask if he should build a little shelter for each of them.

As he says this, his words are literally overshadowed by a bright cloud and he and the others hear a voice that causes them to fall on the ground and hide their faces in fear. *“‘This is my Son, the Beloved;”* says the voice, *“with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’”*[17:5]

As the three disciples are cowering on the ground, Jesus came and touched them and reassured them.

It was time to go back down the mountain. *The vision was decidedly not over.* However, it was time to take all that they had seen and experienced and carry it back into the life of the world. It was time to move on.

In one of the commentaries I read this week, the writer wrote of the many times she had wanted to stop time, to freeze a moment. She wrote of her wedding day and the joy of the day with her husband and both their grandparents and parents and brothers and sisters, and how they had all been together and so very, very happy. She wrote of the day her child was born and the amazing joy she and her husband had felt the first time they had laid the child in its cradle when they were home together.

She reflected on the many times she had wanted to stop the clock, the calendar, the very sun, up in the sky, and stay in that day, that moment.

That is what Peter wanted to do, too. He wanted to dwell in that moment, to bask in it, to delight in it. It was the most perfect moment in his life. It was a moment filled with certainty—he was, for the first time in his life, perfectly certain of the love of God. In that moment in the presence of Christ, Peter’s life, and the life of the world, was filled with every good possibility, even peace, joy, the complete and utter defeat of fear and want.

I doubt any one of us here blames him for wanting to stay on that mountain and in that moment—not when we think of our own moments of perfect joy and peace; when we remember those moments in our lives when love was tangible. We did not want anything to change.

More often than not those were the moments when love was a face we looked into perhaps at the moment when life began—a birth, or a deep and loving new relationship.

For others it might have come to us in the hands we held as life came to conclusion. When we realize that we would have been shattered and hopeless had we not had been able to see and feel—even in that moment—the arms of God folding around the life of both ourselves and the one who was being released from this life. In those moments, we know sorrow, even deep sorrow, but often—eventually—we also know the peace and the strength God’s love brings with it.

What Peter, James, and John were given on that day in the mountains with Jesus was something like that. For them it was a moment of perfect recognition of Jesus as Christ. He was, and is Emmanuel—God-with-us, who does not hang back in this divinity. Rather, in his divine-self, he joins us in our humanity.

Jesus the Christ. He is the one who comes to us even today so that we may do more than simply endure this world—the world of where there are crosses everywhere we look; the world that has the ability to break us.

It is into this world that Jesus returned to show us that no matter what happens, no matter how heartbreaking, chaotic, random, or dark, this world we live in is the very place that Jesus Christ will never abandon. This is the world that will never be beyond God’s love. Therefore, it will never be beyond God’s desire and God’s power to redeem it.

The mountaintop experiences that we have are meant to inspire and remind us of God’s commitment to the world and to us—of course. However, they are also meant to remind us that because God’s promise is to never leave us, never to stop loving us, the best monument we can build to honor God is a life that reflects Christ in the way we live—in how well we obey the commandment to listen to God’s beloved Son.

This means that, like the song that kept running through my mind, we are not going to stand still, not going to freeze the moment. Just like Jesus showed the disciples that day, we are going to keep *“movin’ on, movin’ on.”*

We are going to take the bright vision of Christ’s shining face and we will carry his light into places of darkness and fear and allow it to bring every hurtful thing into the light. In the light shameful, selfish things will be exposed and banished; lies and deceit will be corrected; hunger and need will be fed and cared for. Most of all, all of these things will be seen because we have followed Christ. We have moved on with him toward the people and the places where his light is most needed.

Friends, this is our good news is that Christ is always on the move, always advancing toward us; always heading back down the mountain to be with us. More good news is that we can go with him. Indeed, we have been told that this is our mission in life: to listen to Christ.

So, let us pledge ourselves to just that. Let us listen and obey. Let us go with him, wherever he leads—even to those places where his light, and our faithfulness, is needed and wanted. Even to those places where it is not.

Most of all, let us rejoice and be glad of the God who keeps movin’ on to be with us. Indeed, let us give thanks for such a God. Amen.