



# “A Change Is Surely Comin”

Text: Matthew 16:24-17:8

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It was not lost on me that I was writing this Transfiguration Sunday sermon on a mountain. I cannot tell you how restful and restorative my time away was and I thank you all for providing the time and the resources for me to have two weeks of study leave every year. I know how much it benefits me and I hope you receive some benefit as well.

As you probably know, I was in Crested Butte, Colorado for a week of reading and writing, getting things sermonically ready for the Season of Lent which begins this Wednesday. The last celebration before Lent begins is today - as we remember that event we call the Transfiguration. Jesus is on a mountaintop with Peter, James, and John, and something happened. It was strange and frightening and wonderful all at the same time. And, simply put, something about Jesus changed.

The location is interesting. Jesus is on a mountaintop. This is not the first time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus is on a mountain. The Tempter takes Jesus to a "high mountain" and offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will just fall down and worship him. Jesus goes up on a mountain and delivers his sermon, complete with Beatitudes and teachings. And here we are on a mountain again. Mountains are symbolic places - high places - places that are closer to God than some of the places we go in our regular round of things. Trust me, everyone needs a little mountain time every now and then. We should not be surprised that Jesus has taken his closest disciples with him for this encounter with God, though we should point out that once there they were virtually useless.

The location of the story in Matthew's gospel is equally interesting. We are at a hinge moment in the gospel. This entire passage begins with Peter making his great confession of Jesus' identity. Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter quickly responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." This earns Peter a great compliment and commendation.

But, then, Jesus starts talking about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Have you ever had a friend or a family member who seems obsessed with talking about their death? Do you remember how that feels? Fear, frustration, anger - they all show up. And that is how the disciples may have felt as Jesus spoke to them of his suffering and ultimately this death.

Peter has enough of it. "Far be it from you, Lord. This shall never happen to you." Jesus turns on Peter and takes him down from whatever position to which he may have exalted him. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man!" From "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!" to "Satan." How the mighty have fallen!

Then Jesus begins teaching the disciples that to follow Jesus - then and now - is to embrace a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice. "For what will it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?" To follow Jesus means to deny oneself and endure whatever must be endured. There is no promise of prosperity. There is no assurance of acceptance. There is no guarantee of status or position. There is no pledge of popularity. Discipleship - authentically following Jesus - leads to self-denial and self-sacrifice.

And then, just six days later, we are told, Jesus takes the three disciples up the mountain. In this "thin place" - as the Celts call it - in this high place where the separation between heaven and earth is ever so slight - where God and humankind are close - and where those of the past and present can meet - Jesus is changed. In the presence of Moses and Elijah - long gone yet present still - the very embodiment of the law and prophets - both of whom were taken to heaven before suffering human death according to Jewish tradition - Jesus is changed. "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light." Matthew tells us nothing about which the holy three spoke. Any sermon based on that portion of Matthew's telling of the story is mere speculation.

But, then, a voice from the cloud - not unlike the voice heard at Jesus' baptism - repeats the words: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased..." - and these words - "listen to him." Listen to him? About what? Obviously, we are to listen to everything that Jesus teaches us. Still, within the context of the story and the greater passage, "listen to him" may well be an endorsement that what Jesus has been saying about his suffering and death must receive our attention and understanding for it is true. The vision of Jesus being changed in the sight of his disciples must be coupled with the admonition to "listen" to him. And listening is not something done just with the ears. "Listening" is made evident in the life-actions of those who call themselves Jesus' disciples. "Listening" means "doing."

When they come down from the mountain, the tone of Jesus' ministry changes. The parables and the healings continue, of course. But, from time to time, Jesus reminds the disciples that they're heading to Jerusalem and they know what that means. Despite the crowds, the adulation, the wonders, and the words, they are on their way to Jerusalem and the suffering and death that awaits Jesus there. A change is surely comin'.

Here we are, on this Transfiguration Sunday. We're bringing the joys of Christmas and Epiphany to a close. It's the last time we'll sing or say "alleluia" until Easter morning. The colors are white this week.

Next Sunday will be the First Sunday of Lent. There will be a more somber tone. The Kylie will return - "Lord, Have Mercy Upon Us." We'll sing the words of the criminal crucified with Jesus - "Jesus, Remember Me When You Come Into Your Kingdom." The colors will change to purple. A change is surely comin'.

And in our own pale imitation, we will enter into a season of self-denial and self-sacrifice. The season of Lenten fasting will be upon us - which we will observe in pitiable ways, considering the fasting practices of our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers. The season of Lenten penitence will be upon us - which we will likely remember for a few days and then return to the normal way we live our lives. We will allow ourselves a few discomforts that we will call self-denial and self-sacrifice - no chocolate, no soft drinks, no television.

But what we need to remember - and what the Transfiguration tells us - is that in the upside-down, inside-out nature of the Kingdom of Heaven - where the proud are brought down and the lowly are lifted up - where the hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty - self-denial and self-sacrifice are the norm. In the upside-down, inside-out Kingdom of Heaven, suffering can be expected because the Kingdom of Heaven stands against the ways of the kingdoms of earth. In the upside-down, inside-out Kingdom of Heaven, injustice is named and called out, not ignored or tolerated. In the Kingdom of Heaven, hatred is confronted with love. In the Kingdom of Heaven, truth conquers falsehood and compassion overcomes hatred.

And when you start talking that way and living that way, there will be those who will seek to silence you. When you start standing up to the bullies and browbeaters, you will be decried and dismissed. When you stand with those the world stands against, you will - quite often - stand alone.

One of my seminary professors, the late George Edwards, had a great quote he often used. George would say, "Jesus came talking about love. Why do you think they killed the man?"

They may have killed the man, but God raised the man. There's the good news. The sufferings and sorrows, the distress and dolors we may experience will be swallowed up by God's power in resurrection and new life. There can be no resurrection without death and no new life without the passing of the old. God will not be mocked. God will not be dismissed. God will be victorious.

The late, great, Sam Cooke penned the words of a song that summarized his experience and became an anthem of the civil rights movement. The last verse of the song says:

There have been times that I thought I couldn't last for long,  
But now I think I'm able to carry on  
It's been a long, a long time coming,  
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will...

In this hinge-moment of Matthew's gospel, in this story of Jesus on the mountain, in this celebration of the Transfiguration, we are reminded that "A Change Is Surely Comin'." God is not finished. Jesus will not be silenced by the hands of humankind. And God will be with all who follow the hard and rocky road that is certain for those who would be disciples of Jesus Christ.

"A Change Is Surely Comin'." It surely is. And it will change everything.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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