

## *Sermon for the Transfiguration of Our Lord* February 3, 2008

**TEXT: Matthew 17:1-9**

...Rev. Charles R. Exley

If you follow the political news on TV, you've discovered that "change" is the order of the day. As presidential candidates solicit votes and debate each other over issues and experience, "change" has become the buzzword that each and every one of them tries to explain. The subject of every speech is, 'How I plan to "change" the current situation and make it better for everyone involved.' All that seems to vary is *what* they plan to change, and *how* they plan to change it. And, as all of us head to the polls next Tuesday to vote in the primary elections, the big question running through most everyone's mind will be, "Who is going to bring about the best form of change?"

I started thinking back about many political campaigns. I've been an involved observer of politics since the Presidential Election of 1960. I haven't missed a single election cycle and have probably heard a majority of the televised speeches uttered since that time. And, do you know what? "Change" is always the topic of national elections. The question is not whether the candidates are going to make a case for "change." The question is whether they will really make change happen. Will anything really be different once the elections are over?

As a wonderful quirk of timing, today in our scriptural texts the subject is also "change." But I'm not referring to the shallow, cosmetic changes that often follow political elections; I'm talking about the changes brought about by God. I'm talking about changes to Jesus himself... and to the disciples – first to Peter, James, and John, and then to the others. And subsequent to the disciples, change that touches history, the church, the world, and finally you and me. I'm talking about real change – the kind where today life happens one way and tomorrow things are different.

Today is the day in the Church Year we call the Transfiguration. The name itself says "change." *Trans* or "across;" *Figuration* or "form." "Across Form" – to change form. That's what happens to Jesus – he changes form. I find it a bit serendipitous to experience this day as a part of our liturgical structure just at the same time when "change" has become the buzzword within our society as well. To my way of thinking, learning about real change from God may help us to appreciate the kind of real change we need as people living in community as well. And, I'm willing to suggest that the scriptural story of Transfiguration offers us some clues about real changes in us as well.

You have to wonder what went through the minds of Peter, James and John as Jesus leads them up a high mountain by themselves. It was clearly these three Jesus wanted with him. I've always wondered if they had any idea about, "Why me?" It must have had something to do with Jesus' appointment of Peter for a special leadership role, and perhaps something similar for James and John that is not written down. After this experience on the mountain top, however, future experiences would seem more clear, because after this experience those three disciples were changed. Indeed, some theologians have argued that the real significance of the passage is the change in these three men – even more than the changes that occur for and to Jesus. While the changes were real for Jesus, he surely had at least a premonition or a sense of what was going

to happen. But the disciples – not only had they never experienced anything like this before, they had no idea what remarkable events lay ahead. They were changed.

Two things happened that made all the difference. First, it was the light and the appearance of Moses and Elijah – symbols of law and prophecy. Believe me, it was no accident that the happening on the mountain included a bright and dazzling light. Since the oldest of Old Testament times this was the light of clarification; the light of truth where one is forced to see clearly what we would rather leave in the shadows. It was the purifying light of fire; like God was seen in all God's glory on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel back in Moses' day. The dazzling white clothes of Jesus had been bleached of every imperfection; purified with the truth of God's presence which lies at the heart of real change. Jesus, Moses and Elijah – drawn together by and through the light of truth and reality; demonstrating beyond all doubt that Jesus was the continuance and the completion of God's presence among people on earth. Peter, James and John had seen it for themselves. They were now changed into bearers of a truth about God's love and about God's presence that was absolute. They had something to share with the world that no one else alive could describe with the same kind of certainty.

The second thing that changed those disciples was the saying that issued forth from the cloud; the words that God spoke directly to them. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" And they knew the message meant more than simply paying attention in class. "Listen to him..." meant discernment. It meant using all one's senses and all one's concentration to appreciate everything about this man Jesus. Yes, listen to his words; but watch carefully the way he acts out everything he has described. Use all your senses to see that those Jesus loves are not just the loyal, culturally-correct Jews. Jesus never pushed a single person away – be that person a hideously filthy and afflicted leper or a Samaritan woman who had had so many men in her life that the other women wouldn't even talk to her or allow her to draw water with them. Watch carefully the way Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, as a carefully scripted commentary on the arrogance of the Roman generals forcing their way through the crowds atop their war horses. Feel Jesus touch those he was not supposed to touch; listen to those he should have ignored; eat with those who ate unclean food as they spoke of unclean thoughts. Pay attention to everything he does; and then do the same. As he is different, be changed yourself.

Like happens at all times of serious human change, the disciples were overcome. Scripture calls it being "...overcome by fear," but that's a very simple and non-precise way to describe it. They were dumbstruck; overwhelmed by the magnitude of everything that had just happened. They had received such a dose of truth that it hit hard against the culturally-conditioned notions they had used to define themselves. I know who you were when you got up this morning, but now you are someone different. The experience of truth, of life, of God has changed you into someone else. One more piece of naivete has lifted from your eyes like a surgeon removes a cataract. You see more clearly now and you will never be able to return to your older and more thoughtless ways.

Finally, when Jesus comes to the three men, touches them and says, "Get up and do not be afraid..." he is not talking about their being afraid of the strange sights they have just witnessed. He's not talking about the bright light or the presence of Moses and Elijah, reappearing from the

past like some ponderous bit of science fiction. Jesus is not even talking about the voice of God and the words of direction that came booming forth from the clouds. Jesus is saying, 'Do not be afraid to come down from this mountain with me and live your life in a new way. You have seen the clear and present truth. And, by virtue of this truth, you have been set free to recognize the lies that are perpetrated against you and the others.' Live as I live. Give as I give. Love as I love.

Well, that's the story of change we have been handed by the Church and its historical record. Frankly, it's a whole lot bigger story of change than I have ever heard from the mouth of a politician or the words of a party platform. But, the change experienced by the three disciples – and offered to us as a result – is not a change that comes from leaders who devise or enact new policy. The change Jesus lays before us is a change of heart; an opportunity to see and live our lives from a different perspective. This is no cosmetic change – not even a shot of Botox or a trip to see the nip-and-tuck doctors. This is real, substantive, effective change. This is the kind of change we sometimes describe as "new life." This is the kind of change that turns a fisherman named Simon into a disciple called Peter, the Rock.