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## **Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17: 1-19)**

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Australians traditionally mark summer as the season to drop your bundle, to rest and recuperate. Living with the knowledge that come January, by week three after Christmas we will have hit that sweet spot when you finally feel human again, can enjoy go slow time for a week or two, makes our busy lives for the rest of the year seem manageable.

Except this year, for many of us, that sweet spot never happened. We lived through the fire season with an underlying anxiety about what next, and who next? Coastal holidays were cancelled, many of us rallied to protect property, or to support family members or friends caught up in the emergency.

Here in Canberra, we spent most of January staying indoors to avoid smoke pollution, with an underlying concern that the Namadgi fires might cause a repeat of the 2003 firestorm. It was hardly a relaxing time.

There's now the phrase: "This is our new normal", which raises the question, will summer ever be the same again? And if not, what does this mean for how we live well in this land? What is this new normal going to look like?

We may be forgiven, as we enter into the season of Lent this week, for thinking that perhaps Lent is done and dusted this year. Was not January already a season of penance and sacrifice? Sackcloth & ashes?

Tonight's reading offers a timely respite from a year that is off to a tough start. It's the story of Jesus transfiguration. It's a press pause moment in Jesus journey as he approaches the threshold of ending his rural ministry before heading into the trials of Jerusalem.

In the paragraphs preceding this story, Jesus warns the disciples of his impending conflict with religious leaders, death and resurrection. Now it's time for Jesus to gird his loins, so to speak before entering the fray. To do so, he withdraws to the mountain top to gather strength.

Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up the mountain. Once there, they witness Jesus transfigure into his true nature: his face shines like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah arrive, and Jesus begins to talk with them. It's a fantastic image, these three, shining, holy men in deep conversation.

And it is at this point that Peter has a Martha moment, - he wants to take action and create a shelter for the three men. That instinct to act when you're out of your depth is powerful drive, and as we know, it's very much within Peter's character to put his foot in his mouth. When all else fails, look busy... is a tried and true action so to not feel so uncomfortable!

It takes the voice of God, speaking from a cloud to the disciples, to interject. "This is my son, The Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Of course, this encounter with God fills the disciples with fear, and it takes the physical touch of Jesus to reassure them not to be afraid. And at that moment, again they are alone with Jesus, and reality eases back to somewhat normal, four men standing on top of a mountain.

It's a story that describes a sequence of events, but there's not much action. And I think that is the point! When confronted with events that are beyond our knowing, outside our comfort zone, our ego and instincts take us towards being like Peter. We want take action, to do something, to be useful.

But this story reminds us that it is not us, but God who is in control. In this story, the voice of God comes directly to the disciples in that moment of confusion. The clarifying voice, that "this is my son, with him I am well pleased." Jesus follows the will of God perfectly, where the rest of us, like Peter, tend to stumble.

If we place ourselves as the disciples in this story, they are in a passive role, following Jesus up the mountain, witnessing this fantastic scene, and that is all! It's easy to overlook that the truly active character in this narrative all along, is in fact God. It is God who calls Jesus to come to this place and it is because Jesus draws close to God, that he is transfigured and revealed as his true and divine self.

It is the point at which Peter stumbles however that God's presence is made explicit. It is at that point that we remember that God has been an integral part of the story all along. The whole point of this story is drawing close to and ultimately communion with God.

This is not a story about doing. It's a story about being, that we are each invited into. In a lecture delivered to a Sojourners conference in 2018, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman, spoke about the work of Old Testament prophets, who brought new visions to challenge the totalistic and corrupt structures of the worlds they lived in. He suggests that the Old Testament prophets knew God in a particular kind of way, for them God is a lively character, and a real agent who acts in the world, who causes endings and who causes new beginnings. "And," says Brueggemann, "that's worth thinking about, because that is not ordinary thinking among us — that God is a lively agent and a real character."

We are comfortable thinking of God as a character in a story, or by following rules, reassuring ourselves that is what God wants. Listening for God as an active agent in our world is hard. Because if we do listen, then we may also need to actually respond & step out in faith!

Brueggeman goes on to say, "If you consider most conservative evangelicals, they do not believe that God is a lively character and a real agent, because they've got God all packaged up into sustained systematic explanations. And if you consider most theological progressives, they don't believe that God is a real character and a lively agent, either, because they really believe that God has no hands but our hands."

I read that comment as saying that it's an easy temptation, to retreat into our intellects, or go deep into our hearts, to escape being fully present just as we are to encountering God as a live agent in our lives and in the world. Our challenge is to allow ourselves to live in the middle ground between both head and heart and not use either as a retreat from the work we are called to do.

In this community, the suggestion is, you may have already supposed, that the practice of meditation offers the middle ground space in which we might encounter God. That by daily committing our lives to stop doing, and enter into the space of

simply being, that we allow ourselves to come into the same presence that transfigured Christ on the mountain top, to his truest divine self. It is through the practice of meditation and encounter with Jesus, that we might undergo our own transfiguration into our own truest selves.

Negotiating the “new normal”, comes with the growing realisation that true leadership to live well in this country, will come from the ground up, rather than the top down. It will come from listening to indigenous leaders, and scientists with practical experience. It will come from listening to the visionaries and the poets who are our prophets. And it will come from us who are committed to listening to God as an active agent in the world, who are prepared to step out in courage, wisdom and in faith, to lead, to be led and to follow.

Amen.