

St. John Lutheran Church

The Sermon

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Sermon, February 19, 2023

Matthew 17:1-9

The Gospel lesson for today takes place at a turning point in the story of Jesus's life. Up till now, Jesus has told the disciples about the power of God: That it is concerned with everyone, even our enemies, and especially with those who are having a hard time. That it is concerned with us: "God knows every hair on your head," Jesus says.

Jesus has also shown the disciples the power of God. He has healed many, many people. He has cast out demons. He has fed thousands and thousands with practically nothing. He has calmed storms and raised the dead.

Now, in the verses immediately before the Gospel Lesson for today, Jesus shows us where the power of God comes from. He says, that he must be humiliated and rejected and killed, and on the third day, rise. He must go to the cross, in other words. He also says that if we are to be his followers, we must go to the cross, too.

This is where the power of God comes from.

Then, in the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus shows us where the power of God leads: He brings Peter, James and John up on the mountain with him. His face shines like the sun. he talks with Moses and Elijah, representatives of deep tradition from the ancient past. The cross leads to life.

Jesus does this before he journeys to Jerusalem. He does it before his trial and execution, so that when he dies, his followers will know that death is not the end. When things get hard for his disciples, they will remember the light.

I think, sometimes, Jesus sends us a transfiguration too. Jesus gives us a reminder of the light, that in this world which has many crosses, many kinds of death, the God's life is always deeper.

For example, many of you will know that I just got back from a wonderful 30th anniversary vacation with my wife, in the West African nation of Ghana. Ghana and Africa in general are places of wonder and beauty, of powerful expressions of human life, and astounding scenes of nature. We saw elephants and crocodiles in their natural settings. We saw women walking along in their daily business, wearing these spectacularly colorful dresses, carrying loads on their heads that towered above them. We saw everything imaginable including, literally, the kitchen sink, for sale on the side of the road. It was grand.

While we were there, we also visited a very hard place. It is called Cape Coast Castle. It is one of the places from which enslaved persons were loaded onto ships, to be carried over to Brazil, the Caribbean and to North America as part of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Now different tribes have been taking slaves from one another all over the world for as far back in history as we know. People would sell prisoners of war as slaves, or convicts, or other folks. But when the Portuguese came to West Africa, they brought the buying and selling of human beings to an industrial scale. Millions were taken captive and force-marched from hundreds of miles away to the coast, where they were kept in Cape Coast castle under horrific, unspeakable conditions. When the slave ships came, they would be forced through a narrow door, which they now call the door of no return, because they would never come back. They have a sign above that door now, "The door of no return." It was a hard, hard, somber place, like visiting a concentration camp.

Now, about forty kilometer miles north of the coast, there lives a group of people called the Assin. The word, "Assin," means "Traveler, or Wayfarer." These are the descendants of people who managed to slip away from the slave caravans before they got to the coast. On their land, two small rivers meet, where many slaves were given a bath before moving on farther south. It's called the Last Bath. There was a slave market there, and a cemetery.

The elders of the Assin people kept this place closed. No one was allowed to go there.

In the 1990's, representatives from the African Diaspora, that is, descendants of the people who had been forced through the door of no return, who had been sold as slaves in Brazil, the Caribbean and North America, asked the elders of the Assin if people could come to visit, to reflect and grieve and heal. But the Assin elders said, "No. We do not want the land where our children live to be a land of weeping. We don't want our children's land to be a land of grief."

But the representatives of the African Diaspora came again and said that this would be a healing thing, if people could come. So the elders of the Assin said, "Yes, you can come, but only on this condition: that you put another sign on the other side of the door of no return, that says, "The door of return," and that you bring the bones of someone who was taken across the sea, and you carry those bones back through the same gate they went out of, back through the door of return. That you give them a proper, traditional burial here, and that their graves be marked.

And that's what they did. They put up a new sign on the other side of the door of no return, that said, "The door of return." The bones of two people, a woman from New York and a man from Jamaica were brought back through the door of return, and were buried there on that land.

And now, people come, and reflect. They will touch the water, and sit in the water and let it flow over them for an hour. They will grieve, and they will take a step of healing.

You understand what the elders of the Assin did. They acknowledged the cross. Yes, the unspeakable suffering and cruelty of the slave trade. But they also called on a still more unspeakable beauty, a still more profound life.

They transfigured their land from one of weeping, to one of healing.

Every once in a while, Jesus sends us moments of resurrection, to remind us that the cross is not the end. Suffering is not the final word, evil is not absolute, not even the most horrific, but rather, love wins.

Watch for those reminders. Watch for those transfigurations, where we see the light, because they are the truth. Thanks be to God.