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Last Sunday in Epiphany
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Get up and Live Forward

1Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Matthew 17:1-9

Last Sunday I was not one of the estimated 113 million people who watched the Super Bowl, which I heard was a very good game even though our beloved Patriots were nowhere close to making it to Arizona. I passed on watching the game on my last day of vacation south of the border, though Mexicans love American football and the game was blasting out of every bar and restaurant we walked by. So, I missed what for many is the best part of watching the game: the commercials. Though I did hear about the Jesus ads. Did you catch them? The two spots were funded by the He Gets Us group, who post on their website that their goal is to reintroduce people to the Jesus of the Bible and his confounding love and forgiveness. The first commercial was innocent enough: scenes of children embracing other children with acts of kindness set the music of Patsy Cline with the simple message that the innocence of a child is the path to the heart of Kingdom Jesus came to proclaim.

The second spot ran for 60 seconds and was far more provocative and was aimed to get us to rise over the many divisions today. With screen shots of intense conflict, protesters ready to battle, irate passengers getting tossed off of airplanes, the words to highlighted at the end were these: Jesus loved the people we hate. Interesting choice of words.

The cost of the two ads about Jesus during a Super Bowl: \$20 million dollars. And by the volume of controversy the campaign generated, people on all sides of current divisions expressed displeasure. Some do not like the politics of those funding the campaign, and others complained that they did point to the true gospel. Many people asked the obvious question: if Jesus himself had \$20 million to spend in today's world, would he spend it on ad campaign, or say, feeding the hungry, buying tents for refugees and building homes for those unhoused in our nation and world? Just a few ideas.

In the end, I have to ask: is it necessary today to rebrand Jesus for people to believe in him and follow him? Has our world and culture been so saturated and soaked by the dominance of Christianity that we've lost sight of its founder whose movement began with a collection of simple, largely uneducated women and men whose lives were turned upside down by what they saw and heard.

Which brings us the gospel story of today. The Transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of his three closest disciples. Was this the first attempt to re-brand Jesus, if you will, to show him in different light for others to see him in a new way?

We book end the gospel story with the Exodus account of Moses atop on another mountain for forty days and nights waiting for God to give him the law written on stone tablets.

I've been told, by those around me – my family mostly – that I have a tendency – a slight habit – of repeating myself. “So you’ve said,” is how they respond to me – my loved ones. Are their criticisms valid? Perhaps. And, from my point of view, the things they claim I repeat are clearly things that must be important and relevant, otherwise I would not repeat them. It seems very clear to me. And I am in good Biblical company as it turns out.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke – all three gospels that share the most material – all tell the story of Transfiguration of Jesus – an event that has been called the mother of all epiphany stories (From the Salt Project). The event is a turning point for both Jesus and those who would follow him. Just before they climbed the mountain, Jesus told them how his own life would end in Jerusalem, and it would not be an easy or peaceful death. He would suffer and be killed but he would be raised on the Third Day – the day the church celebrates as Easter. And then he did what he always did: follow me, he said.

Where and how do we connect with this story that we repeat every Sunday before the season of Lent begins?

This story gets its name from the way that Jesus was transfigured, changed, before the three: his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. And then the two important figures of Israel's yesterday appear representing the law and the prophets: Moses and Elijah. One can only believe that Peter, John, and James saw Jesus in a different way – in a different light – after such an experience.

What breaks through for me is what happens next. What did Jesus say to the three? When they heard the voice of God, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear: Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

“Get up” is something Jesus would say again and again. To the healed man who could now walk: Mark 2:11 “I tell you, get up, pick up your mat, and go home.” Taking the child by the hand, Jesus said to her, “Talitha kum!” (which translated means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Mark 5:41. And to the leper who was healed, he says: “Get up and go on your way: your faith has made you well.” Luke 17:19.

There must be a connection with getting up and living into a new life. When physically possible – and is not possible for everyone so we have to condition this part -- Jesus is saying: change your position and your perspective -- how you see the world, and start living the rest of your days. There is no time to remain static and stationary and waiting for the world and life to happen, get up and move. Move forward.

And then Jesus repeated himself – so you’ve said Jesus – when the three were gripped by fear, he touched them he said do not be afraid. Get up and do not be afraid go hand in hand.

If the message of the one Super Bowl commercial was to encourage us to love our enemies as Jesus did, the part that makes that a whole lot harder is fear. How do we love when we are afraid of those who threaten, demean, yell, challenge and provoke?

Fear is the root of many things. Thomas Merton, a monk and mystic of the last century, once said that the root of all war is fear – not the fear we have for one another – but the fear we have of everything.

There is a twist at the end of the story. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The three must have been bursting inside wishing to broadcast to all in range of the spectacular thing that just happened.

It is not always easy knowing something that others do not know -- to carry a confidence, a secret or a truth -- a problem or a trauma that is too painful or personal to share. There can be great relief to be able to confide in another, so to lighten the burden, ease the pain and feel less alone. But in twist in this story, the three disciples would have to wait to share what happened until after the Resurrection.

The mountaintop experiences eventually ended for both Moses and for Jesus and the faithful three. They and we all come down off spiritual highs to live in the ordinary and routine.

What has always called to me in this gospel story is the only direction from that moment on was forward. Into the future. For as constant as is God’s presence, so too is the call for change. The word for transfiguration is like our metamorphosis – to be changed. As a child, I remember being fascinated by the life journey of a caterpillar to a butterfly. It begins with an egg, followed by a caterpillar – a creature always fascinating to children with so many tiny legs. Its purpose and goal is to eat and eat and grow while shedding its skin over and over again. Then it becomes a chrysalis and suspends itself in a tree or branch or buries underground and waits – for a few months and even a few years. And finally, a butterfly emerges, that looks nothing like what it once was – that slow caterpillar inching along the ground. It opens its wings takes flight.

This is the right story to hear before we begin the 40-day journey of Lent towards Easter. Get up. Don’t be afraid. Live life forward. And rise.

