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Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 24: 12-18 and Matthew 17: 1-9
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In the bible, every time I read about mountain and cloud at the same place, I expect the entry of God, and that is exactly what happens here. Such a familiar setting for us Christians! To be honest, I never thought a great deal about this text before preparing for my sermon. It did not speak a lot to me. I knew of Jesus' heavenly status, and God's declaration of Jesus being the Beloved Son was not something new (we hear that during his baptism). And yet, this incident is included in all the 3 Synoptic Gospels. First, let us look at the inherent nature of the transfiguration. To my understanding, transfiguration of Jesus is not the same as transformation from his original human form to his heavenly state, but rather, should be thought as a glimpse of Jesus' original form in heavenly glory. This aligns perfectly to Paul's letter to the Philippians 2:5-7, where he says: "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." We read about Elijah and Moses. In this text, Elijah signifies the Prophets and Moses signifies the Law. Their presence signifies the fulfillment of the prophecies and the solution to the big problem that comes with the Law: Sin. And finally, and most importantly, we read about the declaration: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!" Just as in the Old Testament, word is given priority over vision. Of course, the mystical experience of heavenly reality has a great value in itself, but a clear declaration of God's will through God's own words is in a totally different league. That leaves very little room for doubt or a just mere human interpretation different from God's will. It also shows how important this matter is to God that it was not left to just a vision. There is one important difference between this declaration, and the one which is given right after Jesus' baptism, and that is the addition of the words "listen to him". This brings the focus to the disciples. Now, this text cannot be read independently without the important context from the previous chapter, Chapter 16, where Jesus famously asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Pleased with this response, Jesus blesses him, and says, "you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church". Clearly, the disciples were faithful and loved Jesus. But, soon afterwards, when Jesus tells them about His death, Peter takes him aside to say no such thing would ever happen to him. To this, Jesus again famously replies, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Therefore, we see that even though the disciples loved and cared for Jesus, they did not fully comprehend God's purpose for him. The Jesus they know heals the sick, feeds 5000 people, stops the storm, walks on water and out-wits the smartest of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Isn't this the Messiah who is supposed to bring justice and put an end to all oppression? They could not imagine him to be weak. Even though Jesus performed such great signs that fulfilled the prophecies, his closest disciples still did not understand his purpose and destiny. Perhaps this is the reason why Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the mountain in order to strengthen

their faith and understanding. Perhaps a revelation in the form of his transfiguration would do the trick. But again, we see a familiar nature of response from Peter. Instead of quietly standing in awe of what just happened, or even asking Jesus what he wanted, Peter goes straight to what his own action should be: whether to build three dwellings for them. Two-thousand years and an unlimited amount of scripture interpretations later, when Christianity is one of the major religions of the world, and being brought up in a Christian background, it is very easy for us to think of Peter and the other disciples to be foolish. But were they really? Are we that much different?

If we think about it, we will realize that these disciples grew up in a Jewish culture and their faith and belief in Jesus were because of the wonders that they witnessed while they were with Jesus. With every new miracle, every new parable, they would know and understand Jesus more and more. With that understanding, came faith. This points us to the inherent nature of faith and understanding. I believe this has not changed even today. Our understanding (may it be through reading the scriptures or our life experiences) influences our faith. Interestingly, today's reading shows us that it works the other way around as well. Jesus did not take the whole crowd who usually follow him to the mountain top. Instead, the very few he knew were faithful. And to them, Jesus reveals his glory. Not everyone gets this knowledge. He even warns them not to disclose this incident to anyone else. Knowledge of the truth is given as a gift to those with faith.

This relationship between faith and understanding might sound very beautiful, but it is far from being perfect. Even after the revelation of the glory of Christ in the form of transfiguration, the disciples fail to understand. They think Moses and Elijah were here to stay and reign with Jesus. Even after they see, they fail to grasp. So, their faith leads them to the truth, but they fail to understand, the very ground on which their faith was based on. Is it so much different now? Last quarter, we studied the Genesis in 21Theo. We learnt about the different narratives of the creation stories, and their underlying meanings and implications. We learnt about us being created in the Image of God did not mean for us to have a physical form of God, but rather to have His nature to live in unity and love with each other. This understanding surely emboldens our faith. If we were to think that the universe was literally created in 6 days and in the manner recorded in Genesis 1, leaving no room for science, what would that mean for our faith? In this quarter, we are reading about transgender theology, and have seen how a wrong understanding have influenced so many generations of faithful people to oppress transgender individuals. What is the point of faith if it leads to such injustice? Is it really the love for which Christ died for us?

I have pointed out some fallacies in the relationship between faith and understanding, but I do not mean to claim that they should be independent of each other. Otherwise we will have blind faith and incomplete understanding. Let me explain with an example. Think of an aircraft. Two of its most important parts would be the wings that provide the aerodynamic lift to support the aircraft, and the engine, which drives the aircraft forward. Although they serve two different purpose, both works together to allow the aircraft to work. Our faith can be compared to the wings and our understanding to the engine. An aircraft without the wings cannot fly. The engines will only cause it to move very fast, but on ground. In the same way, without faith we can never hope to receive Christ and the salvation that he promises, no matter how much knowledge and understanding we get.

Without the engine, the aircraft has the potential to fly because of the wings but can never fulfil that. Similarly, with just faith we have the potential to receive Christ in our lives, but without understanding, we can never hear and respond to God's call. Now, imagine a situation where the aircraft is cruising at a very high altitude, and due to some technical difficulties, the engine stops to run. Will the aircraft fall down vertically like a heavy rock? No, but rather it will glide on its wings for quite a long time before actually reaching the ground. If the engine restarts while the aircraft glides, it can actually continue on its journey without a terrible accident. Similarly, if along the way, our knowledge is challenged and broken for a little while, we are not supposed to give up on Christ. Rather, we should let our faith in Christ guide us while we get a better understanding. Once we reach this new knowledge of the truth, let that strengthen our faith, just like the restarted engine enforces the lift on the wings. Giving up on our understanding every time it is challenged and hoping only in faith would be like giving up on trying to restart the engine mid-air. That would lead to eventual crash. Therefore, instead of having faith and understanding depend on each other in a manner where if one fails, the other fails too, we should strive to have them support each other in moments of weakness and doubt. In today's reading, we can see something very similar to this happening on the mountain. Even though the disciples' understanding of Jesus changed on the mountain, their love for him did not. Even though they might have come down more confused than when they climbed up, their faith in Christ did not change. They came down with a new understanding of Jesus and a strengthened faith in him and his purpose. May be this is how our God works in our lives. He creates faith with shaken understanding!