

Last Epiphany, Holy Baptism  
Christ and Grace  
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Matthew 17:1-9  
February 23, 2020

“I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.” The hymn we just sang is not in our Episcopal hymnal, but it’s one that is familiar to many of us. Whenever I hear it I am transported back to my childhood, sitting in Sunday school at child-sized wooden tables and chairs. The snack is juice and cookies, and I am surrounded by friends and teachers who love me. There is a felt board and the box of felt figures, just waiting for us to tell the story about Jesus for that day.

Perhaps your memories are different when you hear this song, or maybe you don’t know this song. But we all have certain songs and stories that trigger our memories and our emotions. Maybe it was a favorite bedtime story each night, like *The Velveteen Rabbit*, or *Goodnight Moon*; or maybe it was that same old funny story your dad or your uncle always told at the dinner table. But no matter what, when you hear that story that has long been a part of you, of your life, you are immediately reminded of where you came from, of an event or a place or a person from the past. Stories connect and shape us; they become the foundation of our community and define who we are.

It is good to hear the stories. They remind us of what has gone before. Not only the good times but those times that taught us valuable or maybe even painful lessons. Since before we knew how to write them down, we have been passing down the stories that define us, so that they will be the words that lead our children and our children’s children through life.

You can see how this handing down of stories works in our readings for today. Notice the similarities in the passages from Exodus and Matthew. In both accounts there is a mountain and a cloud. In Exodus, we hear of the glory of God, while in Matthew, it’s the transfiguration of Jesus into a glorious, bright, dazzling sight. When Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus in the gospel account, it’s like flashback Friday! Every child of Israel knew the Exodus story. They knew it in the way we know the creed that we say each week, or the Lord’s Prayer, or the 23rd Psalm. They knew the stories of Moses - meeting God in the cloud on the mountain, leading the people out of Egypt, through the waters of the Red sea, and the long wilderness days.

They also knew the prophet Elijah, who did not die but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, but not before he raised the dead, brought fire down from the sky and worked wonders for starving widows. The children of Israel also knew that Elijah would return before the day of the Lord, the coming of the Messiah.

So it’s no wonder that the disciples, raised on these stories, fell to the ground and were overcome by fear when they heard God’s voice and saw Moses and Elijah there with Jesus. On a mountain. In a cloud. The stories that had been told to Peter, James, and John since they were old enough to understand them, were becoming reality before their eyes, and they too

were becoming part of the story of God. The disciples were afraid at first, but Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

As we think about the stories of our own lives, we can probably recall times when the truth we have heard our whole lives, but taken for granted, suddenly descended on us like a cloud, or dazzled us with its bright clarity. It tends to happen to us in times of great change or crisis or loss. But it can also happen in times of great joy. Either way, we can receive any of the new truths, changes, or losses in life, only to the degree that we have a foundation of the stories of God that define who we are and whose we are. As we hear the stories over and over they become part of us, and can be drawn on when we need strength and affirmation in all of life's journeys, wildernesses, and mountaintop experiences.

When we find ourselves afraid, as the disciples were at first, we will remember that Jesus was there, that Jesus touched them and told them not to be afraid. It is in hearing the story of God that we become more like God, that we are transfigured and become sons and daughters, God's beloved, in whom he is well pleased. And when we fall, in fear or in failure, Jesus is there to reach out and lovingly pick us up again.

As a community of faith we are called to tell the stories of Jesus to one another. God says, "Listen to him!" and we do that as we worship and study together. We also do that in all the ways we serve God and share the stories with others. Indeed, we are called to this in our baptismal promises – to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. We are all storytellers by nature; we tell stories all the time, and we live them out in our lives, revealing God's glory.

Today we are adding a new chapter to our Christ & Grace story. We will baptize Hartleigh, Hunter, Hadley Kate and Lorhetta, welcoming them into the household of God. We will promise to uphold them in the faith as we remember our own baptismal covenant. All of you parents and godparents, and all of us here who vow to support the newly baptized are given the responsibility to tell them the story of Jesus and his love. To share the stories that show them that they too are part of the story of God. While Hartleigh, Hadley Kate and Lorhetta might not remember this day, Hunter will, and so will all of you! You will tell the story of this baptism day, and as they hear the story again and again, it will be planted in their hearts, reminding them that they are children of God.

We must come down from the mountain and return to the world, but we hold onto the stories and we speak them into our lives. We repeat the stories because they have power. We tell them around the dinner table, we recite them as creed and prayer, we sing them to bring joy and comfort. They shape us and transfigure us into the image of Christ. What is your favorite story of Jesus and how has it shaped you? How does it strengthen and affirm you as you meet the joys and challenges of life? To share these stories is to be evangelists.

"I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love."  
Amen.