

This morning during Sunday School, Sandy Vollmer — our director for youth and children’s ministries — will take the confirmation class to the baptismal font to talk about baptism. Earlier this week she showed me some of the “props” for her lesson: thin, dry, brittle pieces of sponge, cut into the shape of hearts. They were so dried out, I almost didn’t recognize that they were made out of sponge material when she showed them to me. She and the students will place their dried-up hearts in the baptismal font and watch them swell up with the waters, looking full, and — in a way — healed and whole.

Then Sandy and the students will talk about the ways these soaking hearts represent what God does for us in baptism (what God just did in Spencer and Oliver’s baptisms): God fills up our hearts with the Holy Spirit; God heals us and makes us whole; God comes into the places in us that are dry and broken and dead-looking and sets to work on creating new life in us.

Those sponge-hearts can also represent something we keep seeking from God throughout our lives: in moments when our hearts or lives feel dried-up or empty or brittle or small, we come to God hoping for that divine touch to help keep the life alive in us, to fill us up, to make us stronger. We look for a glimpse of transcendence, for a moment outside of our moment, for an experience that helps us see beyond this time we feel stuck in, that helps us see the big picture when we feel trapped in a smaller part of the story, that gives us something to hold on to, something to fill us up and keep us going through the hard times.

When Jesus took his disciples Peter, James, and John up the mountain to witness his Transfiguration, they must have experienced one of *the* moments of transcendence of their lives. And I imagine that the timing of that mountaintop experience could not have been more perfect.

In the Gospel of Matthew the story of the Transfiguration is sandwiched in between stories in which Jesus tells the disciples about his impending death and all that they will suffer in his name. At that point in his ministry Jesus was starting to look ahead towards Jerusalem and arrest and execution; just a few verses before the Transfiguration, we read:

“From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matt. 16:21). It’s the first of four predictions of his death. And then come those famous words: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).

After this conversation comes the story of the glorious Transfiguration, which we just read together. But our gospel reading for the day cuts off the conversation between Jesus and his disciples as they came down the mountain. After he told them not to tell anyone about the vision, the disciple asked him: don’t all the teachers say that the ancient prophet Elijah is supposed to return before the Messiah does his work? And Jesus responded, “...but I tell you Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist” (Matt. 17:11-13).

Over and over again Jesus talked with his disciples about how the prophets that came before had suffered, how he was going to suffer, and how they were going to suffer, too.

I used to think of speeches like those as moments when Jesus’s divinity showed through, and he predicted the future with his godly knowledge-of-everything. But I have forced myself into a new habit of reading these stories: to think about how everyone must have known that danger was coming, because it was obvious. It would not have taken prophetic powers to see what was on the horizon for Jesus and his disciples. Jesus was publicly speaking against a lot of powerful people; he was drawing large crowds to hear him teach; his message and his ministry were rallying too many people — and he was ready to go to the capitol and cause even more trouble. He and his closer followers must have known they would be in danger. They lived with that knowledge, and they moved forward toward Jerusalem with that knowledge.

So I wonder how Peter, James, and John felt, living like that, living with that sense of danger just around the corner. I wonder how they felt every time Jesus, their beloved leader, brought up the fact that he was about to be arrested and executed. Did they ever get weary? Dried-up? Feel empty or hopeless or afraid or wonder if it was all worth it?

In the midst of whatever they were feeling, Jesus took them up the mountain. Jesus took them out of the dangerous moment they were living in, led them off of the doomed path they were walking, and gave them a glimpse of something better. They saw their leader and friend — yes, that one who was preparing for death — they saw him shining with a light as powerful as the sun; they saw the ancient holy prophets Moses and Elijah speaking with him; they heard the voice of God say, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” In that one, bright-shining moment, their faith in Jesus was confirmed. He was indeed the Son of God, the messiah sent into the world.

And yes, they walked up that mountain with the knowledge of the dangerous future they faced; and yes, when they walked down the mountain Jesus reminded them yet again of the cost of being his disciple. But that brief moment on the mountaintop must have filled them up like a sponge in the baptismal font. And maybe they kept that moment with them, and they could remember it during difficult times, and through the memory God would fill them up again, strengthen their faith, and help them keep pressing forward.

The Church carries memories like the Transfiguration and passes them on to new generations of Christians. We gather in worship, in Bible studies, and in so many other ways to hear and tell these community stories. And we discover and share our own stories of mountaintop experiences. We come together again and again in faith that God still works through these stories to strengthen us along the way.

And as we hear these stories, it’s like we are being trained to see God in our everyday lives. Ordinary moments can be transfigured as we sense God moving in moments of silence, or in the wisdom of children, in an act of kindness, in a cry for justice. WE hear stories from mountaintops in faraway places and long-ago times, but they help us see God’s story continuing around us now. May God transfigure our hard times and our dry hearts with the light of God’s presence. Amen.