

Sermon for Sunday, February 11, 2018 - "This Is Not a Tide Ad - How God Gets Our Attention"

Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 11, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus who is God with us.

"When Jesus was transfigured before them, his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." So, we can know for sure that the transfiguration is not a Tide ad. Last week during the Super Bowl, some of the funniest commercials were for Tide laundry detergent. I'm not a huge fan of the Super Bowl or commercial TV, but the Tide ads got my attention. The first one was pretty long and appeared to be marketing a car, then beer, then an insurance company, then diamonds, then a mattress, but we kept hearing, "It's a Tide ad." "What makes it a Tide ad?" a mechanic under a car asked. "There are no stains, look at those clean clothes. What else would this be an ad for?" There were more scenes that could have been marketing all sorts of things, but our attention was drawn to the spotless clothing. "Tide ad", was the constant refrain. "So," the ad ended, "does this make every Super Bowl ad a Tide ad? Watch and see." And I did. I kept looking at different commercials thinking, is this a Tide ad? That first ad got my attention and changed how I approached the rest of the night.

I think that's what happens at the transfiguration of Jesus. Granted the transfiguration is much more mysterious, glorious and significant; but God gets the attention of Peter, James and John and tells them to approach everything that is to come differently. They really need that because from this point on in their story with Jesus, things get really hard.

And when things are hard, when we're suffering, we can lose sight of the God who comes to us in Jesus. We can start to think God has failed or abandoned us, that God is punishing us, or that God has caused our suffering for a reason.

The transfiguration, and what comes after it, offers a different perspective on God and suffering - a perspective that can change how we approach everything.

Before the transfiguration, the disciples' life with Jesus is incredibly wonderful. He heals people, drives out demons, stills a storm, feeds 5,000, walks on water - it's glorious. Peter confesses to Jesus, "You are the Messiah". He sees in Jesus the one they've been waiting for, the one who will save them from their present suffering.

But then Jesus tells them that *he* is going to suffer and be killed. What? Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him - this can't be right. How will you save us, Jesus, if you're dead? Jesus tells Peter, "get behind me Satan."

Suddenly nothing makes sense. Who is this guy? What is this all about? Do I want to devote my life to this?

That whole exchange happens six days before Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain. When they get there, suddenly Jesus is dazzling - shining like the sun and talking with great heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah. Now things are more glorious than they could ever imagine, terrifying but still glorious. This is what a Messiah should look like. Peter wants to set up camp and bask in the glow of it all, but he misses the point. This is supposed to be more than a bright, shiny, feel-good experience. It's supposed to get their attention, to change how they see things and how they move forward. A cloud overshadows them and a voice speaks from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." God calls them to pay attention and take note.

They head back down the mountain and things seem to go from bad to worse for Jesus, very quickly. He keeps talking about his suffering and death. He angers the authorities constantly. He's arrested, beaten, and sentenced to death.

Jesus does not seem much like the Messiah the disciples were expecting as he goes through all this. The bloodied Jesus wearing a crown of thorns doesn't look much like God's beloved Son shining on the mountaintop. And yet, it is the same person. God, in Jesus, has entered suffering. The transfiguration should help Peter, James, and John to recognize that - to see that this is the Messiah who is beaten, tortured and killed, and to pay attention to what that means.

It means everything that happens to Jesus isn't a sign that he's failed or weak or ungodly. It means that God's glory is revealed not only in feel-good experiences but even more fully in the way God deals with suffering. God, in Jesus, enters into all that holds us down and breaks its power over us.

The transfiguration should help the disciples to recognize that, but it doesn't at first. The resurrection should also help, but even that doesn't quite do it right away.

It takes Jesus' presence with them in the bread and wine and his presence in the broken yet blessed community. It takes his teachings that they return to after his death, it takes prayer, it takes the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the church. It takes all of that for the disciples to view Jesus' suffering differently.

Like the disciples, we also need a changed perspective. We often imagine that God is above our suffering, calling all the shots; or that God is totally removed from it all. It's hard to recognize that God is truly with us in all that we face.

Yet the same things that were given to the disciples are given to us - bread and wine, water, God's word, prayer, the gathered community. All of this is given to get our attention and change our perspective on God and suffering.

We are given glorious experiences in worship and life. We're given things as insignificant as Tide ads that can help us "watch and see" things differently. Most of all, we are given Jesus who will go to any length to show us that we are not alone, that God is with us in all things.

With these gifts, we can approach suffering differently - looking for signs of God's presence, for signs for new life. We can also follow Jesus into the struggles of the world to be part of how God is bringing new life. God doesn't avoid suffering and we don't have to either. We can go where Jesus leads, trusting that we are not alone, so that we might help others to know that God is with them as well.

Let's take a moment of silent prayer.

