

## **Sermon: Good to be Here**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Ottawa, Feb 29, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Whenever I get a chance to look at the photo of my own service of Ordination and Induction in 2007, at the Taiwanese Robert Campbell Presbyterian Church, the one that I was robed in white, accompanied by my beautiful wife Daisy, while holding up in my arms both my boys, as they were only toddlers then, I am always amazed. I looked radiant. Both Daisy and I. We looked like a power couple, youthful, naive, ready to conquer the world, to do faithful Christian ministry to change the world...well at least the little corner of the world we occupied.

I recall being blessed by people from New Life Gospel Church in Toronto, where Daisy and I jointly received the call to ministry. It was there our faith was incubated, nurtured, supported and encouraged to grow. It was there I first tasted what it means to be filled with the Spirit, to physically experience the presence of God.

I recall being blessed also by people from Toronto Formosan Presbyterian Church, where I worshipped during the last year of seminary study. It was there I practiced and sharpen my preaching skill. It was there I had first sensed the call to prophetic ministry, not as a teller of future, but as a speaker of God's words, calling God's people to return to the righteous path.

With the blessings of those I had crossed path before, the blessings of those I was about to minister to, and the blessings of the Presbytery of Montreal, with a number of elders and clergy in attendance, I was on top of the world. It was my mountaintop experience, at that service of Ordination and Induction. I recall saying to myself, 'This is good, it is so good, it is good to be here!'

I don't want to harp on just my own story. For those who have walked this journey of faith for some time, undoubtedly, you would have your own story to tell, your own mountaintop experience. It could be a shared experience such as a prayer group you once participated, or a moment of congregational achievement. It could also be an individual journey, a time you have that clarity of mind, that assurance of faith, a prayer answered, an

unexpected grace exchanged, or a life-long dream fulfilled. Whatever that mountaintop experience be, it was good, it was so good that you wish to go back to that moment, to pause in time, so to savour it over and over, again and again.

I think, that is how Peter was feeling, in the Gospel account of Matthew 17, the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that six days after Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, Jesus took Peter, along with James and John, the trio of his closest disciples, up on a high mountain. On that mountaintop, Jesus was transfigured before them, as his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. What is even more amazing to the disciples was the appearance of Moses and Elijah, seemingly talking with Jesus.

Moses as we recall, had his own transfiguration when he went up on Mount Sinai to meet with the Lord God, recorded in Exodus 24 and 34. Twice he went up the mountain to receive the Law, written down on two stone tablets, what would become known as the Ten Commandments. The second time when Moses came down, the skin of his face shone, though he did not know how. The Israelites were so terrified of what they saw on his face, that Moses had to eventually cover it up with a veil.

Commentators have made distinction between the shining of Moses and that of Jesus, pointing out the skin of Moses shone due to his encounter with God, sort of a reflection of God's glory, whereas the shining of Jesus seems to be coming from within himself. I am not so convinced of such differentiation.

Elijah, the prophet par excellence, as far as in the Scriptural account, had not exhibited transfiguration like experience. He was, however, lifted up to heaven by a chariot of fire, at the tail end of his ministry, witnessed by his beloved disciple Elisha. Since the prophecy of Malachi, the last of the twelve minor prophets, the Israelites had been hoping for the return of Elijah, in advance of the coming day of the Lord.

We, and the disciples of Jesus, weren't told as to what transpired in the conversation between the three. Symbolically speaking, Moses represents the Law, Elijah represents the Prophets. The appearance of these two beside Jesus, affirms the earthly ministry of Jesus as the continuation of the Law and the Prophets, bridging the Old and the New Testaments as one tradition.

To the disciples, the sight of these three must have been a sight to behold, to treasure, to grab hold of and never let go. So Peter, always

the bold one, blurted out what was in his heart, “*Lord, it is good for us to be here.*” He can’t quite comprehend what he was seeing; he can’t quite understand the implication of that sight, but he knew it was good. So he also blurted out, without thinking or overthinking, “*If you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*”

I can totally understand Peter’s compulsion to fix in place what is good. Because it is hard to let go of what we once have, especially when we had it so good. It’s hard not to look back, to romanticize, especially when the way forward is all but downhill into darkness.

Here the thinking of the Eastern Church could be helpful to us raised in the Western tradition. Whereas the Western Church seems to focus solely on justification by faith in Jesus Christ, the Eastern tradition focuses much more on the process of sanctification. More specifically, *theosis* or deification is the goal in life. It is a process by which individual seeks to become more and more united with God, by setting aside oneself through ascetic practices like repeated fasting, austere living, intense prayer, and in some cases social isolation. It is also said, when one begins to attain *theosis*, one’s face would glow with a sapphire-blue light, not unlike the transfiguration of Jesus. I know, sounds a bit ridiculous and dangerous. But, is there actually a path for us to such a union with God through Christ?

Saint Anthony of Egypt, the first of the Desert Fathers, is perhaps the best example. He was the first to reject both the empire and the Church (more specifically the excess of the Church). By retreating into the desert, in pursuit of *apartheid*, or holy stillness, Anthony paved the way for others to take their first step on the road to total selflessness. This is what James Cowan, the author of *Desert Father: A journey in the Wilderness with Saint Anthony* had to say in the introduction: “Here was a man who defied logic. He proposed dirt, hunger, loneliness, demonic battle, anti-sociability, non-ambition, nonmaterial aspiration, asexuality, and the denial of all family affections as the basis of a new kind of adventure. It was almost as if he wished to deny everything that made the human experiment worthwhile.”

Anthony did not write much, but he did leave behind legends of the power of his prayer, as one who was much closer to God than the rest of us. Cowan also points out, Anthony and the Desert Fathers did not do this alone, there were always others, disciples and followers who gather around these seemingly lonely pioneers. Communities grew around them and supported them. In time, the monastic movement emerged out of them, a movement that changed and enriched the fabric of the Christian faith.

I will leave with you, on the bulletin cover this week, the painting titled 'Transfiguration' by the Italian master Raphael, assisted by his apprentice Romano Giulio. We see the transfigured Jesus in shining white cloth, floating in the air, flanked by Moses and Elijah. We see the three disciples on the ground looking up in awe and perhaps in fear. What I really like about this painting, though not explicitly described in the Scriptural text, as Raphael undoubtedly exercised his artistic licences, is the presence of a crowd, of common folks, perhaps pointing to readers of this sacred text like you and I.

In essence, we become part of this painting, we become part of this transfiguration. Seeing it with our spiritual eyes, perhaps already is the first step towards *theosis*, the union with God through Christ. Just like the disciples who walked down that mountaintop, not into darkness, but journeying with the living Christ, and wherever they went, shining their light.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**