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The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Psalm 103.8
The psalms emphasizes that a major characteristic of God is steadfast love one hundred and twenty times. That God is love is a view we should keep in mind as we make our way through the scriptures. It will be helpful today before we come down the mountain.

In today's gospel story the messages are clear, "Here is Christ" and "Do not be afraid." These are messages of good news. The news this week comes with special effects, brilliant light, transfiguration, rhetorical clues, and an authoritative voice. Who doesn't love a transfiguration story?

Slide – Princess Fiona

When our kids were young, a certain fairy tale was in the theaters where the princess is transfigured at the end of the story. It was the story of Shrek, a swamp ogre, whose name in German means "fright" or "terror." Without knowing him you could think he was what his name meant, someone to fear. Fiona was under a spell in which she was a beautiful princess by day and an ogre by night. Whenever nighttime fell, she hid herself until the dawn, finding her ogre form to be ugly. Only love's first kiss would break the spell and allow her to take love's true form. She looked forward to that one day when her prince would come and she would finally assume the form of a beautiful princess 24 hours a day.

Her prince charming turned out to be mean. When he saw Fiona's dual identity, he found her ogre form hideous. He was ready to punish her but then Shrek stepped in and the prince charming was vanquished. Shrek had a heart and compassion. At the end of the story love's first kiss sends Fiona rising into the air in a cloud of brilliant light as she is transfigured into her true form. When she comes back to the ground, to her surprise she is an ogre! At first she is dismayed, but Shrek assures her that she is beautiful to him and is indeed in "love's true form." They head off to a happy life in the swamp. It's the kind of magical ending which makes us happy.

In the story of Jesus' transfiguration, the love displayed is deeper than the love of one individual for another. It is a love which shapes communities and changes the world. This spectacular story comes at the midpoint of a series of scenes that define who Jesus is.

Slide – scripture and heart

In the scenes in the biblical story leading up to the transfiguration, the disciples worship the Jesus who walks on water as the Son of God, but they cannot fully wrap their minds around what it means for Jesus to claim to be the Son of God. Although Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, he sharply rejects Jesus' announcement that suffering and death is his way. Peter and all the disciples are learning how Jesus is defining his rule. It takes some effort. In the days prior to the mountaintop experience, Jesus affirms Peter's insight but rejects his protest, calling him Satan for tempting the Son of God to define himself by glory and not by suffering. In addition to that, Jesus calls Peter and anyone else who wants to be his disciple to follow him on the road that leads to the cross. They are going to need all that God can give to help them walk this path, and God obliges.

The Greek text often points the student of scripture to things the author highlights. This week the Greek word of the week in Matthew is *idou*. When *idou* is used the author is pointing and shouting. It could be translated, "Look! Look!" It occurs three times in our nine verses in Matthew. It appears in the text, not

when Jesus face shone and his clothes became a brilliant white, but when the two Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah appear, and Jesus is talking with them.

I think the author is pointing and shouting here because of what these two represent. Moses was a great leader who brought the gracious word of God to the people of God at Mount Sinai. The chosen people of Israel were to learn who they were by knowing God's word and obeying it. In the practice of following God's word the people would come to know they were treasured by God. Elijah's role was to restore all things in times when the people had strayed away from their true identity.

Look! Look! Jesus is in conversation with these two greats. This is good news. He is affirming them. Jesus is affirming the gracious word of old, the Torah, the teachings Moses helped to institute and Elijah restore. God's word of old is a treasure that continues to have relevance. Jesus will refresh the word in his interpretation but he will also prove to be obedient to all that God has said. The steadfast love of the Lord holds over time. Because it is God's intention that God's people live in a community, the pattern of encouragement and forgiveness first displayed in the teachings instituted by Moses remain.

Peter sees Jesus talking with them. In a response of faith and hospitality which we only see in Matthew's account, Peter says, "Lord, if you wish, I will make three dwellings." He does not appear to be afraid or confused. Instead Peter seems to understand some of the importance of this moment.

While Peter was still speaking, suddenly, (Look! Look!) a bright cloud overshadowed Moses, Elijah, and Jesus plus the three disciples. A voice from the cloud, God the Almighty, speaks and affirms Jesus. Here is Christ! Listen to him! This is great news! The disciples fall to the ground. It is no wonder that they are overwhelmed by this God moment. As Malachi says, "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"

Slide – Jesus on cross

Jesus approaches his frightened followers, touches them, and tells them not to be afraid. Though they cannot bear to hear God speak from the cloud, they can listen to Jesus. The word of God comes to them now, not as a thunderous voice from heaven or letters written on tablets of stone, but in the words and actions of Jesus. The Son of God speaks to them as one human speaks to another, and they rise and follow him.

as we read that he is transfigured on the mountain. Here is the treasured Son of God who embodies the grace, mercy and love of God in all that he says and all that he does.

Encouragement from Jesus will be needed, too, as we see him reach out and say "Do not be afraid." Being active in the kingdom of God as it is breaking in can be overwhelming for the disciples of Jesus' day and for us, but remembering that what it means to be the body of Christ makes it possible for followers to participate

On the way down the mountain Jesus tells them once again that the Son of Man must suffer, and he orders them to tell no one about the vision until after he has been raised from the dead. Jesus directs the disciples away from understanding him in terms of glory days and instead reminds them of the steadfast nature of God that has prevailed for generations. To walk with Jesus means to have an eye for needs of the neighbor. Jesus invites them to walk with him into the suffering, to the hungry and hurting crowds, and to see them as human, God's beloved creatures.

At Gethsemane, when Jesus himself faces the temptation to disobey his Father and abandon the road to the cross, the same three disciples who saw him transfigured wait with him while he grieves and prays. He passes the test, but they do not. He walks steadfastly on to suffering and death, and they desert him and flee. On the cross Jesus shows the world the obedient Son of God in all his suffering humanity, pouring out his blood for the forgiveness of sins. After the resurrection the Son of God appears to the disciples with all his divine authority, calling them to baptize and to teach people to obey his commands. Then he sends them down the mountain and into the world he loves, promising them that he will be with them always. We too are sent; we too must listen and obey. And the promise of his presence is ours as well.

We know such stories of lives being transfigured and changed. But the Christian story is light on the magic and solid on the source of future, forgiveness, mercy, grace and faithfulness. That source is God, the father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And Jesus doesn't just magically make our lives better. Instead Jesus loves us with a deep and complex love, an ancient love, a divine love, that can be seen as far back as the time of Moses and God's first covenants with God's chosen people.

God confirms that Jesus embodies that love.

Love's true form can surprise us.