

C Transfiguration 2.27.22

Luke 9:28-36

Focus Statement: Jesus gives us glimpses of the future and a pathway forward.

This week as the tension heightened in Ukraine and fighting broke out around the country, I found myself thinking about guinea pigs. About one particular guinea pig actually; a guinea pig that may or may not be the property of an eleven-year-old girl.

Several weeks ago, as the tensions between Ukraine and Russia had really started to intensify, I was listening to an interview with the head of the Ukrainian committee on foreign affairs, Hanna Hopko. Hopko is unique among Ukrainian governmental leaders, in that she is young for a high ranking official, my age, and has an eleven-year-old daughter. The interview was about the rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine, but it eventually detoured into a conversation about her eleven-year-old's birthday wish, a pet guinea pig. Hopko shared how she and her husband were uncertain about the pet. They were concerned if Russia attacked, having to flee Kyiv with a guinea pig. But in the end, they'd decided Hopko's job had forced their daughter to give enough of her childhood in support of Ukraine, she could at least have a guinea pig. The interview ended with the pronouncement that they were going to go that weekend to a pet shop and get the long-asked-for guinea pig.

This week, as shelling broke out around Ukraine including Kyiv, and the news filled with stories of people fleeing the cities, of fathers moving their families to rural villages and returning to enlist, I kept thinking about this guinea pig. Somewhere in this mayhem of

chaos and fear, was there a guinea pig in the arms of an eleven-year-old girl, being carted away to safety?

I'm going to interrupt this line of thought really quick, because of course as I was working on the sermon I googled "Ukraine minister guinea pig" and I have an update for you.

Hopko's daughter is in Western Ukraine with her grandparents. Hopko and her husband are still in Kyiv but because of Hopko's high position in government, it isn't safe to stay in their apartment, so they are in hiding. And with them is Nafanyah, the guinea pig.

Unfortunately, Hopko's daughter didn't get to meet Nafanyah before she left for her grandparents. But when she calls home, which she does multiple times a day, it isn't her parents she wants updates on, or her friends, or the general geopolitical situation. She wants to know about Nafanyah, the guinea pig. How it's doing, what it's eating, what it likes. In the middle of an unprecedented international crisis, my entire attention is focused on one eleven-year-old girl and her guinea pig.

I think the story of Hopko's daughter and the guinea pig has my attention because the scale of the conflict is too much for me. I cannot comprehend missiles raining down on cities, thousands of Ukrainian lives at risk, millions in turmoil, thousands of Russian soldiers forced into combat, their own lives at risk, under false pretenses. I simply cannot manage the scale of that. What I can manage is a guinea pig. Is the guinea pig safe? Is it happy? How that guinea pig is bringing a sense of comfort and normalcy to one eleven-year-old. In the middle of chaos, fear, and destruction, an eleven-year-old getting a pet guinea pig is a small but solid declaration that the way things are now is not the way they will always be.

The way things are now is not the way they will always be is also what Jesus declares in our Gospel reading for today, albeit in a much more fully realized way than a pet guinea pig. Our text starts with Jesus taking Peter, John, and James and going up a mountain to pray, “eight days after these sayings.” “These sayings,” that Luke alluded to were Peter’s declaration of Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus’ first prediction of his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. After the transfiguration, Jesus’ mission turns from the Galilee southward, as he set his face toward Jerusalem and that predicted death. Things were hard for Jesus and the disciples, and they were about to get a lot harder. How much harder, how much darker, how much fear and threat and challenge they were about to face, only Jesus knew. And so in this brief moment, after the disciples have made a claim they do not yet understand, Jesus gave them just a glimpse of his glory, enough to hold them over, to spur them on, to keep them going for the long, hard road to come.

Of course, as has so often been true of the disciples, is so often true of us, Peter missed the point of this revelation. Instead of seeing it for what it was, a glimpse to keep you moving forward to the goal, Peter thought it was the goal. “Master,” Peter declared, “it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings...” and stay. What Peter wanted to do here is a super common thing. He had experienced a spiritual high, a sacred moment, and he wanted to preserve that moment for as long as he could. But this wasn’t the moment, it was merely a foretaste of it. So as soon as Peter had spoken those words, a cloud overshadowed them while a voice came from heaven, just like at Jesus’ baptism, declared him God’s Son, his Chosen. And just as quickly as the moment happened, it was over.

“When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

Now, let's be real, probably the reason they kept silent was a combination of terror for what had happened and realistic belief that no one would believe them anyway. But theologically, part of the reason they kept silent is because it wasn't the time yet for telling, that was still to come. The transfiguration, this revelation of Jesus in all his glory, for who he really was, was their guinea pig, their sign of the promise that all had not yet been revealed.

Along with this glimpse of the promise, the story of the transfiguration also offers us two concrete tips for how to move forward, and how God moves with us, when things are hard and dark and scary. The first is in these two companions, Moses and Elijah. In all the times I've read this story, I picked up a new detail this time. Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about “his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” What I think we see here is even Jesus needed, or at least wanted, someone to talk to about the hard thing he was about to endure, was about to have to lead his followers through, and Moses and Elijah were two men who knew about leading reluctant people through hard situations, knew what ascending into heaven was like. They could talk to Jesus as equals in a way his disciples could not. Could commiserate with all he was about to endure. Not fully, no, but in part. More than anyone else at least.

Dear people of God, what I take from these two's presence is that even Jesus needed companions and confidantes, and God gave them to him. And if Jesus needed them, how much more do we, and how much more will we get. Sometimes we get a solid mentor, a confidante who has walked this way before, as Moses and Elijah were for Jesus. Sometimes it's a guinea pig. But the promise we have in God is we never go through this journey alone. We always have companions on the way.

The second concrete tip this passage offers us is the power of prayer. Jesus took Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray. He was praying when the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Jesus was transfigured, was revealed in his glory, during prayer. In Luke's Gospel, prayer is always when transformation occurs. At Jesus baptism, the heavens opening, the Spirit descending, and a voice declaring him God's son happened not during his baptism but after, while he was praying. And at the end of Luke, after his resurrection, in his final appearance, Jesus lifted up his hands to bless his disciples, and it was in the act of asking God's blessing that he was lifted up. "And [the disciples] worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem" no longer with sadness but instead, "with great joy." Dear people of God, prayer is one of the places we get a glimpse of the holy, one of the places we are transformed, because prayer transforms us. We often think of prayer as asking God for something, but prayer is in fact the vessel through which God reveals Godself to us. And sometimes, as in the case of Jesus' transfiguration, reveals ourselves to us. Prayer helps us see ourselves in the way God sees us, shows us pathways to move forward we may not have seen, gives us glimpses of the promise, and a companion we can always call on.

Dear people of God, the promise in this story is that the way things are now is not the way things will always be. And even more than that, the things that are the way we'd like them, those things are just the briefest glimpses of the promise of the kingdom. Don't worry about being stuck here, but don't yearn for the past either. Forward we move, forward God calls us, for as we say about the Eucharist, this is but a foretaste of the feast. Thanks be to God. Amen.