

February 26, 2017 – Transfiguration Sunday  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Matthew 17:1-9

### **The Times They Are A Changin’**

This Sunday is a day of change. Every Sunday is about change, but this Sunday in particular marks a change in church season, from the time after Jesus’ birth, to the time leading up to his death, from Epiphany to Lent. You have no doubt heard many variations on a certain joke about change, that joke that includes a light bulb:

How many aerospace engineers does it take to change a light bulb?

None. It’s not rocket science.

How many hipsters does it take to change a light bulb?

It’s a very obscure number, you probably won’t have heard of it.

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?

Three, but they’re really only one.

That punchline is actually about God, not God’s followers, so how about this one—and I have to credit our regular Director of Music, now in FL, because he told this one to me:

How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb?

Change?

Religious institutions (and not just Lutheran ones) are not always known for their nimbleness, their swift transformations. Which makes sense, when you consider what churches are: a group of people, which varies in size and composition, even from week to week, which, despite its ever changing present is connected to something very, very old—timeless. The current collection of people that is a church does not always seem to have a whole lot in common with the church’s first iteration. Nor may they seem to have much in common with one another, except that they associate, voluntarily, when they are able to, sometimes not knowing why... On better days it’s because of this sense of something more, of needing something more, and of being part of something more, a something which no one fully understands... All of this is some of the reason why religious institutions usually take some time to do things, which can be painful to observe and be in. As one of my pastoral colleagues sometimes notes, wryly, “moving at the speed of church...”

But you can take that saying and replace the word church with that of many other institutions, religious ones not being the only ones that change slowly. You can replace the word church with other process, external and internal processes that take some time: getting a graduate degree, getting yourself into an analyst’s office—lying down on the proverbial couch (usually it’s a chair). There are light bulb jokes about these processes of change, too, about how painfully slow they are, and what they can take of you: How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb? One, but the light bulb must want to change. One of the ways that change is hard is that it happens so slowly, so much of internally. So slowly, even with all kinds of intention and effort, so slowly as to seem imperceptible.

That’s not the only thing that makes change hard, though. Another way that change is hard is that it happens so quickly. This is probably why we have jokes about change that describe it as trivial and time-consuming, those jokes about changing lightbulbs, because sudden, drastic change is scary and real. One day you were well, and then you got the diagnosis. One day you had a job you loved, and then you didn’t. One day the loved one was there, and then they weren’t. One day last November one president was predicted... As a nation we are still trying to understand such change, seemingly overnight, in an institution known for moving slowly.

I think the swiftness, and the slowness, of change is embedded in human experience—often simultaneously. Each on its own is challenging enough, but often, changes fast and slow happen at the same time—and this makes our experience of life yet more difficult and strange.

I think this same mix of change is embedded today's gospel—itself a strange and difficult story. In some ways, it all seems to happen very fast: in no time at all the disciples and Jesus reach the mountain's ascent and Jesus' face begins to shine. It's like the brightest light bulb you can imagine is now on, it's always been connected to the power source but now it's taken an extra turn and the intensity surges. The disciples are, in rapid succession, overwhelmed with enthusiasm and fear. Biblical scholars explain all this as a theophany, a revelation of God's glory, sudden illumination. But for all that it's a swift story, there's a long process building up to it. There were years that the disciples had spent following Jesus, learning from him, before they saw this flash—short lived as it is. And they weren't even sure what exactly they were seeing, or what to make of it right then—note their strange responses. What's more, even afterwards it took some time to understand it all. They couldn't even talk about it at first, Jesus himself tells them that. And even when they got to the point when Jesus said they could talk about it, even after the resurrection, the disciples didn't get it right away. We have lots more Bible stories about that. It took Jesus' followers some time for them to really understand what it all meant, who the God they met in Jesus was—if they ever fully did.

This is true not just for followers then, but for followers today, even two thousand years after the resurrection. Our experience of the gospel, of God's brilliant good news, is still a process of change that is both fast and slow. What God does for us in Jesus is both a sudden and sweeping and total transformation of what we are, and also a long, slow, painful process whose effects can appear all but imperceptible.

Earlier in this sermon I repeated a joke that poked fun at hipsters. In fairness, I need to repeat another story. I've already told a few people about it, about a strange experience I recently had, hearing a band that can only be described as hipster (it's very obscure, you probably won't have heard of it). The lead singers, two brothers, could not have been out of their twenties, but their music had an older sound to it, a mix of country western and fifties crooners. The crowd reflected this mix as well. Grizzled and grey haired cowboys danced two steps alongside young people wearing cat eye glasses, cardigans, and tattoos. Most of the songs sounded mournful, including a slow one that was a love song with a weeping guitar. For this song only a single couple danced, a younger couple: he in a plaid shirt and a modified Mohawk, she in a pencil skirt, high pony tail with thick straight bags, and a nose ring. They swayed together, their eyes locked, and then, suddenly, he got down on one knee and proposed. The place erupted in applause; the band continued crooning while giving them a thumbs up. There we all were together in a bar, a congregation of strangers, cheering on an old institution, marriage, something that no fully understands but that changes all involved.

And then it was on to other songs, one of them faster-paced, still minor in sound and dark in feel. That particular song was called, "You Got to Change Your Ways or Die." The band said, "This is one of our hopeful songs, because you've got two options." Change, or die.

We all know we're going to die; God knows how much we need to change. Lent is a season that makes us freshly aware of this, of our frailty. But do not for a minute forget that above all Lent is a hopeful season. Because God didn't just make lightbulbs, God made, God gave us, God is light.