My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

These last six weeks we have been steeped in stories of social justice through the eyes of Black America. It may seem very strange to talk about the experiences of blacks in almost all-white towns. It can feel removed from our consciousness as something that doesn’t live here, a problem that is in another time and another place, like reading “To Kill A Mockingbird”. That was required reading in my time to keep alive the reminder of what was only a few years’ prior the actual events and drama of Black America. Today’s younger folks may have trouble believing that people were killed because of the color of their skin, and others oppressed them because of the color of *their* skin. After all, our Supreme Court took steps only a few years ago to eviscerate the Civil Rights Act’s provisions that were put in place because these events were real and needed to be stopped in the most forceful way possible. And now they’re permitted.

And they say history repeats itself. It sure do, yessir.

How many times have we heard this scripture, the story of the Transfiguration? Every year we attend church, right? For some of you, it’s been over 50 times. Others have heard it, but maybe not remembered it is done each year at the end of Epiphany and just before Lent. Jesus ascends, with some disciples, and there’s a cloud, some voices, images of Moses and Elijah, and then Jesus emerges. Peter is so excited he wants to put Jesus on par with Moses and Elijah by building little temples to each of them. In that way, he can prove his faith.

But the thing is, the disciples didn’t understand even this, even after God says it, that Jesus is different than the prophets, that Jesus is teaching them that they, too, can do God’s will with and through the church, and that they, too, are not the same having witnessed and understood what they have seen.

They witnessed, for sure. But did they understand? Not yet. Because to understand would be to take on new responsibilities for those they encountered. They can’t just pass along the problems to Jesus. It’s their stuff, too.

It’s their stuff, too. They can’t just slough it off as if they’ve never encountered it, blessings or the problems.

Mamie Till-Mobley…how many people know that name? If you were alive in 1955, you probably never forgot it. She was the mother of then 14-year old Emmitt Till, who was visiting some relatives and in town one day, and stopped to talk to the 21-year old white wife of the proprietor of a store. He allegedly whistled at her, violating the unwritten rules of the Jim-Crow era South, and several nights later, the store’s owner and his half-brother abducted Till from where he was staying and beat him to death and mutilated the body before shooting him in the head and sinking the body in the nearby river. After 3 days of searching, they recovered the body, and Emmitt’s mother, Mamie, insisted that the body be returned to Chicago.

There she held an open-casket funeral, for all the world to see the bloated, bruised, and nearly unrecognizable child who was killed for no other reason other than he was black and a victim of racial hate. The all-white jury acquitted the men, and since they could not be tried for the same crime twice, they admitted in 1956 that they had killed Emmitt in an interview in Look magazine, at that time a general-interest magazine that was just behind Life but ahead of the Saturday Evening Post in circulation.

This was a heart-wrenching, tragic event that helped to spur the Montgomery bus boycott . But these events are in our distant past, right? History doesn’t repeat itself, does it?

Ahmed Arbury was 25-year old black man who was out for a jog in middle-class Glynn County, Georgia. A white man in the area suspected that this particular black man was behind thefts in the area. The white man, his father, and and their neighbor decided to get into a truck and pursue Arbury one day and confronted Arbury with a shotgun. After a physical altercation, Arbury was shot 3 times. Local police and prosecutors declined to make arrests for over 2 months. The white man’s father released a cell-phone recording of the murder to a local radio station that then published the video, and it was only then that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation arrested the three men. They were recently convicted of murdering Arbury under Georgia law, and last week a federal jury convicted them of violating Arbury’s civil rights because of his race.

History doesn’t repeat itself, does it?

The outcome is different, sure; the killers were convicted instead of being set free. But think about it: if the white man’s father had not turned over video evidence of the killing, several levels of institutions that are supposed to protect us declined to even investigate further, much less bring charges. The institutional racism still exists into this generation, even if our Supreme Court believes otherwise and will begin to attempt to strike down the laws which are supposed to help us fight unjust outcomes for non-whites.

And so at this point, you’re probably asking yourself yet again: Pastor Mark, what does any of this have to do with the Transfiguration and our scripture today?

Well, transfiguration is all about a change. Not just for the person who literally changed in a big way, but those who witnessed it, too. Jesus prayed and became different that day. The disciples should have as well, but instead they just tried to document the event in the same way they had done in the past, according to their upbringing and how they had been told by authorities in their world, the priests. Build a tabernacle, or temple, this is what happens when prophets speak.

But they witnessed something that should have shaken them to their core. To know this was different. And as a result, they had a responsibility to act in a new manner consistent with their witness. Why didn’t they?

We began our journey in Black Heritage/History month a little early with the Sacred Ally Quilts coming to our church community. They steeped us in 10 quilts which recounted the dying declaration of George Floyd as he was killed by a white police officer as others stood and watched. And were it not for video released, his story would have never been told.

I wonder what video could have done for the Emmitt Till hate crime had it been around in 1955. The witness of that murder may have accelerated civil rights in America, and it certainly would have cemented the legacy that we have a long way to go before institutions can begin to say that they are color-blind. We can’t affect an institution’s heart immediately, but we can affect our own.

I’ll leave you with these final questions as we enter Lent and prepare our hearts to become renewed.

What is ***our*** transfiguration, based on what we have seen, the books we have read, the songs of social justice that we have sung, and the witness in which we have participated? Are we going to hide behind Peter and the disciples, saying we didn’t know the impact? That we do not see God in the struggle for justice of another race of God’s beloved children?

Are we going to say that their struggle is not real, or it’s over, or it never existed in the first place, even after all that we have had seeped into our bones these last six weeks? What would Jesus say to our nascent witness?

He would say, “I have given you all you need to do what is merciful, just, and loving. Now show me.” For our kind and loving Redeemer, who gives me responsibility and freedom, I say thanks be to God. Amen.