

Transfiguration Sunday A 2011

Texts: Exodus 24: 12-18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17: 1-9

“This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” Matthew 17: 5

May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Today is the celebration of Christ’s Transfiguration. This event in Christ’s life and the life of the disciples is always remembered on the last Sunday of the Epiphany season.

This Epiphany season has been longer than most Epiphany seasons and that has do with how the liturgical calendar is figured. Epiphany always starts with the Baptism of our Lord and always ends with the Transfiguration. At both events God speaks exactly the same words: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.”

But God adds another line to this statement in Matthew’s gospel. It is a line ending not in a period but in an exclamation point: “Listen to him!” That exclamation point makes this sentence an imperative, a command; the previous sentence is a declarative sentence, a statement of fact. Both are needed, not only in this gospel story but also in our lives as disciples.

That exclamation point after “Listen to him!” makes me think that maybe the disciples weren’t doing such a great job in listening to Jesus.

The Transfiguration occurs six days after Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one. Peter declares the identity of Jesus and then when Jesus shares what is ahead, Peter can’t bear it. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Peter just declares Jesus Son of the living God and now he is rebuking him, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” (Matt. 16:22)

Peter’s declarative is also followed by an imperative, also ends with an exclamation point.

Can you imagine that? To claim that Jesus is God's Son and then in the next breath contradicting Jesus takes either real chutzpah or real stupidity. We know from the story that it is the latter because Jesus rebukes Peter with his sternest admonition in all the Gospels, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Peter declares Jesus as Lord and in this passage we are shown that confessing Jesus as Lord is not enough, that confession must spur us to action because if it does not then what the letter of James claims is true; "faith without works is dead."

Like Peter we find that the declaration of who we say Jesus is is the easy part. Listening to him is quite another matter. But God's "listen to him!" is an imperative, a command. It is not a suggestion.

At the Transfiguration Peter, James and John are given a vision of what God's glory looks like, of what God's kingdom can be and they will need to remember this because the drum beat of Jerusalem is getting louder and louder; the cross is just around the corner. In the face of such glory the disciples fall down and then Jesus touches them, puts a hand their shoulders and tells them, "do not be afraid."

Peter, James and John don't understand the significance of seeing God's glory before them. They don't understand that they have glimpsed the future as the veil separating past and present, present and future, has been parted.

The challenge for the disciples isn't the understanding, however. That will happen in time, but not before the resurrection. The challenge is going back down that mountain and listening to Jesus when his physical presence is no longer with them. The challenge is keeping Jesus alive and at work in their community when he is gone.

The events in today's Old Testament and New Testament readings are immersed in creation images. Our gospel story echoes the Old Testament reading of Moses going up the mountain, of God's voice coming out of a great cloud and of God's glory shining like fire, burning so brightly it is blinding. We are told that the glory of God settles on the mountain. In other words, God's glory becomes known and seen

through creation; the veil between present and future is parted and God uses nature to do so in both stories.

Many of you are familiar with C. S. Lewis' Narnia Chronicles. These are a series of novels that explain the Christian the faith through the happenings in the lives of four children during World War II. A lion by the name of Aslan is the Christ figure and in the first book in the series Aslan lays down his life for the creation and the creatures of Narnia.

In the book *The Silver Chair* Aslan speaks for the last time.

“Here on the mountain, I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important that you know them by heart...Remember the signs and believe the signs.”¹

“The air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse the your mind.” In other words, “when you come off this mountain, life will be different, harder, more confusing. Things will not be what they seem. Remember what you have seen. Remember what God has shown you. Remember the glory that is to come when you are in the darkest of times. You will need it.”

The darkest of times awaited Peter, James and John down that mountain. They would need this glimpse of God's glory to survive the crucifixion. In fact, it is only living through the crucifixion, going past the horror of the crucifixion, that they understand the transfiguration at all.

As a result of living through the crucifixion and resurrection and facing their own fears and reluctance they were transfigured into the glory of God so that they could go out and transfigure the world.

¹ Feasting on the Word. Year A Vol 1. Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p. 454

Irenaeus, a second century Bishop, wrote: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

If that is indeed true then this story is not only about Jesus’ transfiguration, it is about our transfiguration. Peter, James and John were never the same after meeting Jesus. They were completely changed, transfigured, after the resurrection. We should not; we cannot remain the same either.

Perhaps you have already experienced the darkest of times. Perhaps the darkest of times are around the corner. In this gospel we have seen the veil between past and present, present and future part; just a little perhaps, but part enough for us to glimpse God’s glory and to know that our transfiguration as individuals, as a congregation, and as a people is possible.

As the veil flutters with the words of God, we see enough of the past and future that whatever it is that frightens us, whatever it is that is keeping us from our transfiguration, from our becoming God’s glory as we become fully alive, as we go through the darkest of times, we need to remember this story and the gift we have been given in getting a glimpse of what is to come.

Coming down from the mountain, descending “into the crushing reality of the world below”² is hard. It is confusing. But just like Peter, James and John, we will feel Jesus’ hand on our shoulder. We will hear the words, “do not be afraid,” and we will be given the strength and courage to listen to him.

Amen.

² ibid p. 455

