

“Transfiguration”
Exodus 24:12-18, Luke 9:28-36
February 23, 2020

And so we find ourselves at a transition: this is the last Sunday of Epiphany (which is the season of the coming of the Light) with the forty days of Lent beginning this Wednesday. With the end of Epiphany, the clouds of Lenten darkness will begin to gather, and the light which first shone with the Star of Bethlehem will become increasingly enshrouded. But on this last Sunday of Epiphany, just before we begin our descent into the Valley of the Shadow, God bids us come to the mountaintop where we can clearly see beyond the Shadow of the Cross to where the brightness of Zion’s glad morning beckons. And we will need this moment of the hope of the Transfiguration to carry us through to beyond Calvary.

In this morning’s New Testament lesson, we find Jesus with His inner entourage of His three closest disciples: Peter, whom Jesus will rescue from his fervent tri-fold denials in order for him to lead a movement which will sweep the earth after Easter; James, Jesus’ own younger brother, will also be there, and who will one day head the Mother Church in Jerusalem; and then there is John, Jesus’ most beloved disciple.

I really like these three guys, and not just for the usual pious reasons. For with all their shortcomings, Peter James and John so clearly remind me of ... myself. You may have heard me say, a bit tongue in cheek, from time to time, that sometimes it feels better to sleep-walk through life than to be fully awake. Well, Peter, John, and James are the same trio who would fall asleep at Gethsemane during Jesus’ greatest hour of need. And today they are in something of a dress rehearsal during today’s scripture lesson, set on Mount Hermon: for some reason they decided this was the time to grab 40 winks while they still could. After all, they were hard-working men, and needed some shut-eye.

We don’t know what time of day the Transfiguration takes place. Maybe it was at the end of the day, so the fatigue of the disciples in Jesus’ inner circle would make even more sense. And then having them awaken from their stupor with the flash of light from

a transfigured Christ sounds about right. But I think we need to look at transfiguration from a 21st century point of view - but not in order to explain it away as if the realities of 1st century Palestine do not apply to today. Instead, we need to ask ourselves this: if our task, as followers of Christ, is to become more like Him, then what are we striving for in our own lives in the light of the Transfiguration?

Indeed, the Transfiguration raises for us a whole series of questions, beginning with this one: When is the last time any of us were transfigured? Or have we never been to the mountaintop? Have we never had those all too brief, all too rare moments when soul and spirit are lifted up, when all is clear, when everything seems to make sense? So many of us live out most of our spiritual lives, unless we are very lucky (for even the saints give witness to this) - surely most of our lives are clouded in mists, if not in darkness. And what is it that helps us to carry on? Is it not those few brief moments, when the light shining in the darkness breaks through to where we are, to where we struggle, to where we grope our way forward? Where would we be without those moments when we have been to the mountaintop, and can see enough to set our course, to revive our spirit, to refresh our souls?

When is the last time we were transfigured? Or do we mean to say that there has been no moment in our lives when someone could look at us, and in a flash of insight concerning our character, our deeds, our love, say like the Roman Centurion at Calvary: "Truly this is a Child of God?" Has no one considered us, what our life means, how we live it, and then said to themselves, "What has she got that I haven't got?" "What is that extra element in his life that makes him whole?" "Why is it that even though circumstances are just as hard on her as on me, if not even harder, even though he doesn't have as much in a material sense as I do, even though they aren't a success, at least as the world measures success - why are they so much richer, in the truest sense of the word, than I?"

When have we been transfigured? Or do we mean that we have never opened the Book of Books and found ourselves faced not with human words that sometimes seem a little out of date, that are put in a way doesn't quite sound like common English, but rather experienced the presence of Moses himself, that great lawgiver not only to Israel of ancient times, but to God's people of all times? Have we never heard the old, old story as told by God's prophets of life eternal, of love everlasting, of grace without measure? Hasn't Elijah ever spoken to us of the majesty of God, of the greatness of God's host, of the still small voice which beckons to you and to me?

What occasion have we had to be transfigured? Were we not told? Have we not heard? That all we need do is to turn our face toward God, that it is not a question of what we have to do to redeem ourselves, but a question of what God has already done for each and every one of us? That forgiveness is free, and is freely given, but that we should also be free in our forgiveness to others? That temptations can be overcome, if we stop striving to overcome it ourselves, but rather let ourselves be overcome by a transforming strength that can take us to the mountaintop, that can shine through us, that can speak to us, that can love us, if we only let it. For God is love.

Will we not let ourselves be loved? Why do so many run away from love, and replace it with contention, strife, indifference? Do we feel, way deep down, that we are not worthy of being the objects of God's affection? Do we sense an undeservedness in ourselves? Do we not allow ourselves to be loved? Are we afraid of the transfiguration that love can bring? That love means redemption, a redemption open to all? For if Christ in God's love cannot transfigure us, who can?

Many people are content, like Peter and the other apostles with Christ, to build memorials on the mountain of the Transfiguration. They acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth was a great man. They even say that He probably had something going for Him that nobody else did. And that Moses and Elijah too have something to say to humanity.

But so many do not want to make that experience of Christ transfigured into their own experience as well. They don't want to know what it all means for themselves, personally, here and now. They don't want to hear that the Transfiguration is not some old story that sounds nice, but means little for our lives.

But is not the story that Christ is the Way? That we are to follow in His footsteps? Is not the Truth that Christ is the example, and that we are to be like Him? Is not Life found in Him, and that if we are to have Life, it comes only because Christ shares it with us? If He has been transfigured, can't it happen to us, too? And if so, to what end?

Transfiguration is not the goal of an experience with God, of our experience with God. For once God has changed us, it is up to us to return to the real workaday world, to leave our mountaintop experience, in order to work for the transfiguration of others. For immediately ahead of us are forty days of Lent, of preparation, in order to face the Cross. And for that experience, we will need to do as Jesus did: to align our will with God's will - through heeding God's voice, through offering our lives in prayer, through walking in the tradition of the prophets. And then, once we have walked the lonesome valley that Christ himself walked, Christ has promised to share His glory, from beyond the Cross, with all of us who place our trust in Him.

Let us pray: