

Sermon Last Epiphany Year A 2011  
Exodus 24:12-18  
2 Peter 1:16-21  
Matthew 17:1-9  
Psalm 2  
March 6, 2011  
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Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday in Epiphany. The disciples and Jesus had been journeying together for about three years when the experience that is known as the Transfiguration occurred. The journey of Jesus' ministry was approaching its end in Jerusalem. But then this event occurs as light in the midst of darkness. The mountaintop experience followed the dramatic identification by Peter in response to Jesus' question of identity. Jesus had asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter was the disciple who empowered by the Spirit, was the first to identify Jesus' divinity when he said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Mt. 16:16).

But Peter's acknowledgment was not a stopping point on the path to understanding this Messiah of God. There was more to be revealed and more to learn before the journey's end. So Jesus took three of the disciples, Peter, James and John up a high mountain. Jesus takes them up the sacred mountain and away from their zones of comfort, to a thin place where the nature of divine life is revealed. In that rarefied air on the mountain top, Jesus became transfigured-flooded with brightness and light. And there he was seen talking with the prophets Moses and Elijah. The very nature of life with God was glimpsed, life where those who have gone ahead in faith are still present and divinely alive. The disciples caught a glimpse of divine life. The greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter was a doer, a believer who felt it was always preferable to be doing something or saying something, not just gazing on in wonder. Peter, always the quickest to respond, interrupted the divine conversation. Peter suggested freezing the picture, capturing the moment for all time. If he had had access to a cell phone he would have been taking pictures. "If you wish I will make three dwellings," he said. When faced with something completely amazing, Peter tries to hold onto it, freeze it, capture it. Build three booths to house these transfigured

persons. Preserve them for all time on that sacred mountaintop. Yet that was not to be. Neither Matthew, nor the other two synoptic gospel writers, revealed the exact mountain on which this experience occurred. It is as if they don't want us to know because they know well our tendency to memorialize and to try to cling to the past.

There are certainly times when I find myself identifying with Peter. Speaking too quickly of course but more often fearing rapid transformation and longing for the known, the familiar. Are there times when you too long to hold onto the familiar? When we enter surprising new territory sometimes all we can think of is self-preservation, of holding on.

Last weekend in our time with Bishop Curry on Saturday morning, he described the dramatic generational transformation occurring in the world today. This cultural change has been devastating to churches of all stripes. In the midst of major cultural change Bishop Curry suggested that sometimes our tendency is just to try to hold on. Like Peter, we try to get a grip; we try to build three booths as it were. But holding on is not the point of this experience.

Peter learns how inappropriate his suggestion was by none other than the voice of God. The voice from the midst of a cloud that once again announces, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." But this time God's announcement ends with a new proclamation, "listen to him." You can almost hear the frustration in the divine voice, can't you? "Listen to him."

We know that the voice was not comforting or reassuring by the disciples' response. They fell to the ground. Their response was sheer terror and they fell to the ground cowering in fear. Paralyzing fear. In fact the Greek text says literally, "they became phobic"!

"Paralyzed with terror they are touched — touched by their master, touched by their teacher, touched by their friend, touched by the Living God, and not only touched, they are commissioned — Get up! You were not created for a fear-filled, perpetual prostration but for something to stand for, to stand up for, and that something is service. The first requirement of this service is to travel down from the Mountain of Glory to watch him who is about to make himself into gift, offering, oblation for all others who are cast down and paralyzed by sin, sickness, and despair. The glory of the mountain will soon become the glory of service and self-

offering, even to the point of embracing the hard wood of the cross. Glory and giving are joined in the person and ministry of Jesus, and glory and giving are joined in the ministry of his disciples.” (Gulick, Last Epiphany, 2008)

Peter was transformed for service as we heard in the lesson attributed to him. Writing to a community at the end of the first century, Peter spoke of the events captured in our gospel lesson. Peter said, “But we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” Did you notice that Peter left off God’s rebuke, “listen to him”?

We live in a world that is paralyzed and possessed by fear. And in some cases probably for good reason. But the last word never resides with humans as imperfect as we all are. The last word, as the events of Holy Week bear witness, resides with God.

Jesus reaches out and says take a step, follow me, trust me. Jesus is always going ahead of us, leading us into God’s future and calling us to glory and to service.

God’s transforming power made manifest on the holy mountain to Peter, James and John has continued to transform the hearts of disciples through time. I learned a great deal about the glory of service and self-offering from a friend of mine. She went by Brac, which was short for Braxton. Brac at one time might have been labeled a spinster. Upon retiring as librarian of Princeton University, Brac returned to her native Tidewater. She returned because her mother was aging and needed her assistance. She came home to care for her mother. Brac was a woman of deep faith. She belonged to a neighboring Episcopal parish. I got to know her because she also attended the Wednesday 7 am Eucharist at the parish where I was a member. Attending that 7 am service became a part of my faith journey.

During my residency, I resolved to attend the 7 am Wednesday Eucharist as a Lenten discipline. For several years I would attend the services during Lent and then stop going. But after several years of Lenten encounter, I was hooked. I found that it centered me in the middle of the week. Lenten disciplines sometimes become a part of our lives. There I met a group of

faithful Christians who helped form me as a disciple as well. Disciples are always formed in community.

So, Brac returned to her family home and cared for her mother for many years until her mother died. After her mother's death, Brac was now free or so we thought and assumed. Several of us thought that perhaps Brac could now do in retirement what many of us hoped to do. She could go wherever she wanted, travel, see the world, or study, etc. But Brac was a woman of strong faith whose life was devoted to service. Brac was on a journey with Jesus who led the way.

One Wednesday morning Brac announced to us that she had come to a decision. She had sold her car and many of her possessions and at the age of 70 or so she had joined the Peace Corps. She would be leaving in just a few weeks for two years of work teaching in the African nation of Cameroon. And true to her word, off she went. She asked us to pray for her and pray each and every week, we did. We received word through occasional letters. But the best part was hearing her share stories of transformation once she returned. Many Wednesday mornings, Brac would reflect upon the gospel lesson with a story from her experience in Cameroon. Brac sensed Christ's presence and work all around her in Cameroon.

The disciples experienced the transfiguring presence of Jesus and Moses and Elijah, as Jesus had set his sights on Jerusalem and the culmination of his ministry. The encounter that would change religious understanding.

Our collect's petition captures the impact of our lessons this morning. "Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory." In our collect we prayed that God would provide us with strength for the journey ahead just as the energy and power of the transfiguration strengthened the disciples for the journey ahead. This revelation occurs in our lessons today to encourage us as we prepare to enter once again the Lenten journey of faith. This vision is one that we can hold onto as we follow the way of the cross. We have seen Jesus and he has called us into glory and into service. Jesus says, "Get up, and do not be afraid." Our journey of faith continues and Jesus is leading the way.