

“Shining in God’s Presence”

Exodus 34: 29-35, Luke 9:28-38

Transfiguration Sunday/C, February 18, 2007

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When you come to worship each Sunday, you may think the service is made up of randomly selected prayers, stories, and music. Changing one element or moving it to a different place in the worship should not make a big difference. If you have ever been in charge of putting a worship service together, you will know this is not true. In fact, every element of worship is like a puzzle; each unique piece has its proper place. What are particularly important and much less obvious are the transitions. When we devise a worship service, especially when we step beyond what we typically do, as we have the past two weeks, we try to pay close attention to the transitions. Does what we do move us from one point to another, one element of worship to another, seamlessly or effortlessly. Does it help usher us into a deeper encounter with God? The transitions are what hold the entire drama together.

That is what we experience this morning, profound moments of transition. Having just told his disciples that he is preparing for his own death, Jesus takes three of them to the top of a mountain for some much needed R and R. It is time to move from Jesus’ ministry of preaching, teaching and healing to his ultimate act of sacrificial love on the cross. They have been with Jesus for all the teaching and preaching in the synagogue, feeding the hungry crowds, finding the lost, and healing the sick. Before his disciples can participate fully in this most important transition, they need some time alone.

Today we gather on the edge of Lent, to pause with the disciples hoping to have one of those “epiphanies” that even post-Enlightenment, scientific, post-modern people still long to have. No matter how much science teaches us, we still long for even a brief mystical encounter with God.

Peter, James, and John have much more than a brief encounter with the holy. They are overwhelmed by God’s presence. Can you picture them on that mountaintop, having just received this devastating news from their friend and teacher? Tired from the long walk up the hill, they sit down to “pray” perhaps leaning up against a rock or a tree trunk, then slowly their heads start to bob back, as they try to stay awake; when suddenly, a vision. Going off someplace to pray with Jesus is one thing. Being visited by the ghost of

Elijah and Moses and being confronted by the booming voice of God is something entirely different. The disciples have no idea how to respond. Initially they can say nothing. Eventually one of them speaks up.

Poor sleep deprived Peter babbles something about trying to build tents or booths or something to capture the moment. He was, of course, only trying to be helpful. Those of us who think every situation requires us to DO something are quickly called back to faithfulness by the voice of God saying, “this is my son, my chosen, listen to him.” Do not do, do not plan, do not worry or wonder, just listen.

Imagine how those disciples must have felt. They had left their families and the comfort of their communities to follow Jesus. They have given up everything for him. They have seen Jesus anger members of his hometown synagogue to the point where he is nearly run off a cliff. They communicate in riddles and parables that few of us would ever understand. To their credit, even after what happens here, none of them abandons Jesus. None of them throws in the towel and goes back to their boats or their tax collecting or whatever else they were doing before Jesus found them.

Now it is time to face the end. Maybe this is just another one of Jesus’ riddles, one of those mixed up statements where the truth lies on the other side of what is being said. After all, Jesus is always twisting things around so they don’t actually mean what they seem. Peter simply wants to bring his friends to see what he has seen. Who hasn’t wanted to stay in a place where God seems so close and available? Who hasn’t wanted to extend a vacation that seems so restful? Who hasn’t wanted to slow the passing of time when things are fun and joy filled? We have a hard enough time finding God, connecting with God as it is, we certainly don’t want to hurry off the mountain when we finally make that connection.

Many of you have had one or more of those cherished mountaintop experiences. When and where, how and why have you felt close to God in your life? Was it on a spiritual retreat? Was it at summer camp or on a mission trip? After serving in parish ministry for more 12 years now, I can look back at my seminary experience as if it were 4 long years on the mountaintop. Where else are people having such spiritually enriching experiences or staying up all night arguing about theology or marching for peace and justice in the streets of Washington, D.C. as we did many times while I was there. However, you can’t stay in seminary forever, no matter

how hard you try. Eventually they will give your apartment away to someone else, stop taking your money, and gently nudge you off the mountain.

Our mountaintop experiences are incredible, unfortunately, we are not meant to stay on the mountain, as comforting as it may be for us to be there. As Peter said to Jesus, it is good for us to be close to God. But imagine if Jesus had shared Peter's sentiments and decided to stay with Moses and Elijah on the mountain? There would be no Good Friday, no crucifixion, no Easter resurrection. As tempting as it may be to stay put, we must eventually come off the mountain with Jesus and continue the journey.

Sometimes too much of a good thing is still too much. In economics there is the concept of diminishing returns. Think about that box of chocolates you got this week for Valentine's Day. You can't wait to eat the first piece, and it is so good! You naturally want a second piece. That one is good too so, you can't help yourself having just one more. Now the third one doesn't taste as good as the first or second because by now you are just a bit full. Maybe, if you have just one more piece, you can remedy the situation, and remember how good the other three were. But alas, now you are feeling really full, and not so good, and you can't even remember how much you enjoyed the first piece of chocolate.

Can God-experiences have a diminishing return? Hard to imagine, I suppose. Perhaps this is what happens when we try to stay on the mountain too long. Mountaintop experiences don't last forever. These encounters Celtic people call "thin places" where God seems particularly near are fleeting and infrequent. The experience does not have the same effect if it does not transform how we live back in the real world. We can not build a monument to the moment as Peter presumes. Jesus insists that we come down, come out of the clouds, make the transition from what was to what is yet to be.

Like the disciples, our lives and our ministry await us somewhere below, off the mountain. The disciples had many reasons for wanting to remain on that mountain, not the least of which was trying to soak in the power and mystery of that day. After all, when they came to their senses, they understood what awaited them back where they belonged. Jesus had just told them that they were headed for the end. Even though they could not yet envision what that would mean, they understood enough to want to stay put. At the very least,

they understood that the days ahead would be difficult, and they would likely call upon this experience to get them through those tough times.

Perhaps we long to stay on that mountain, not so we can avoid what awaits us, but so we can soak up the power of the holy to prepare us for what we have to face upon our return. God spoke loudly and clearly to the disciples on that mountaintop. Does God speak that loudly and clearly to us today? We have a large red sign prominently over the front door of the church that proclaims “God is still Speaking!” It is easy to put up a banner, much more difficult, to believe it is true. What if God is still speaking? What if revelations are still ahead of us? Is that what we mean when we announce to the world, “God is still speaking?”

We have been to the mountaintop and we have seen God. God has spoken loudly and clearly to us. Two weeks ago God spoke through the voices of “Sing Praise!” reminding us how difficult it is to be a young person today and how amazing it is to find a community where you feel loved and welcomed by everyone. Last week the word of God came to us through Lauren and Katie and Josh telling us to never take for granted the power and privilege we hold as North Americans. God told us that we can actually save the lives of people we do not know in Darfur, by speaking out, giving voice to the voiceless, by writing our congress person and declaring “never again.” These were holy moments, moments of grace, true mountaintop experiences.

So, here we are, ready to begin another Lenten journey. The power in today’s gospel story is not seeing Elijah or Moses or hearing the voice of God. The power is in our ability to move forward and instead of listening to our own voice, listening to the voice of our still speaking God. R. Alan Culpepper says, “faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment, but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced.” True transformation, is not the product of a singular, ecstatic, event in our lives, but rather a day to day, even hour to hour process. Every journey begins with a single step. Come, it is time to go. Let us journey together. Amen

Source:

Beth Quick, “Come on Down!” Transfiguration sermon, February 21, 2004

God has proclaimed the presence of Christ
Long ago on a mountaintop.
And because of that, we can now proclaim
The presence of Christ in the world.
Let us go forth, then to proclaim with our words,
With our actions, with our living
That the God justice and everlasting peace is here,
In our world.
And know that, wherever you go, the Spirit of God
Revealed in Jesus Christ, will be with you always.

I must confess that I have enjoyed being on this mountaintop and I am tempted to want to stay here and retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But something within reminds me that the valley calls me in spite of all its agonies, dangers, and frustrating moments. I must return to the valley, something tells me that the ultimate test of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and moments of convenience, but where he stand in moments of challenge and moments of controversy. So I must return to the valley.

Martin Luther King Jr, January 27, 1965