

Sermon - The Transfiguration
Luke 9:28-36
8/6/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was just a little kid, I served as an altar girl at the parish in my hometown. The sanctuary of the church was simple, but it was dramatically marked with a large wooden crucifix that stretched out over and behind the altar. The arms of Jesus seemed to embrace the length of the rear wall, and the head of Christ bent down toward the floor in a brokenness that struck me as profoundly moving. One morning before the earliest service, I came into the sanctuary to prepare, and I was surprised to see an older woman kneeling on the ground, head in her hands, crying gently behind the altar just below the crucifix.

It was shocking. I was embarrassed. I must have been ten or eleven years old, and the sight of a grown, dignified woman weeping alone at the feet of Jesus was stunning to me. I wanted to comfort her, but I was afraid of even being witness to, not to mention participant in, what was the most authentic encounter I had ever seen between an adult and God.

A few weeks later while straightening up after the day's services, I knelt down on that same floor to reach for a missal below the priest's chair that was positioned below the crucifix. From the ground, I looked upward – and I was stunned once again to realize that there, at the foot of the cross, was the first time I was ever able to see – directly – the face of the Christ. From out in the congregation, one could see the bend of his neck, the fall of his hair, even the weave of the crown of thorns. But it was only there, on the floor, hidden behind the altar, where one was able to behold Jesus's face.

In the events of the Transfiguration that we celebrate on this Feast today, the disciples Peter, John, and James experience their own surprising encounter with the face of Christ. They

have been traveling together for some time – they know one another, they know this man who has been their teacher and their friend – and yet there on the mountain, something extraordinary is about to be revealed. Jesus begins to pray, and suddenly his face and his clothing shine with the radiance of divinity. Onto the mountain come two additionally surprising guests: Moses, the bearer of the holy Law, and Elijah, the consummate prophet. The text of Luke’s Gospel tells us that the three men speak of Jesus’ “departure,” – this is the English word that translators have chosen to represent the Greek: *exodon*. His Exodus. They speak of Jesus’ own journey through hardship to liberation, not only for himself, but for all of humankind.

It is interesting to note here that this is the only time in scripture where we read that Moses actually made it to the Promised Land. If we think back to the events of the Old Testament in the Books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we remember that Moses – even as he leads the Israelites toward freedom – he does not, himself, ever enter the Promised Land over the Jordan River. He is forbidden. His actions in defiance of God result in his life’s final act to be to see the promised land across the river, but it is his successor Joshua that leads the people to the other side. It is over one thousand years later when Moses finally makes it to the Promised Land, and it is Jesus who brings him there.

After Peter, like any of us in a moment of wonder, naively begs his teacher to permit them to stay, a cloud descends and from it echoes the voice of God: “This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!” It is the same voice that heralded the Son of God at his baptism. When the cloud lifts, the text tells us that “Jesus was found alone.” In St. Matthew’s version of the story, the Gospel says that the cloud lifted and “the disciples saw only Jesus.” No longer did they need to behold the bearer of the old Law. No longer did they need to turn to the Prophets. For Jesus alone – “only Jesus” – had come to fulfill them both.

The Transfiguration is rich in its significance, like every event in the life of Christ. I have always loved the image of scripture being like a multifaceted gemstone, bright with power that shines differently depending upon how we focus the light. But today I would like us to remember one portion of these events in particular. I would like us to remember that the Transfiguration is a turning point. It is the point in the Gospel of Luke at which Jesus begins the journey toward his crucifixion in Jerusalem. When they return down the mountain, every remaining event in the Gospel is another step directly toward Christ's final Passion. This is, in many ways, a final offering of consolation and assurance for the disciples who will accompany their savior back down the mountainside and right up to the threshold of his own death.

The Collect appointed for the liturgy today prays that we will be mercifully "delivered from the disquietude of this world." That by beholding the King in his beauty, we will be preserved from despair. I imagine this "beholding" almost like the cosmic version of a mother giving her child a hug as they leave for their very first day at a terrifying new school. Perhaps it is like a husband or a wife squeezing their beloved spouse's hand just before they are taken back into surgery. It is a final blessing before the situation is about to become...disquieted.

Jesus reveals the beauty of his divine radiance at the threshold of what feels to the disciples like the end of the world. They are in disquietude, uncertain about what lies ahead and unprepared to navigate this strange new vocation without the guidance of the one who has called them. Yet into this tumult, the voice of God speaks. Heaven and earth are, for a time, not so very far apart at all. He will not leave us comfortless. He will never abandon us along the way. God knows that the journey down the mountainside continues within the hearts of each of us, and that we, too, may feel sometimes like we stand at the threshold of a violent Jerusalem. But into this disquietude, the voice of God speaks.

Someone I love once wrote a poem, and in it she writes: “I want to live without my eyes downcast. I want to live without my fists clenched. I want to live without inventing fear.” It is a poem and it is a prayer. Today, in this Feast, these prayers are answered. In the Transfiguration, Jesus comforts us. He embraces us. He raises our eyes, and opens our fists. He assures us that fear will look like nothing in the light of his own beauty. He reminds us gently that even the moments that feel like the threshold of death are moments of grace and revelation. Even on the mountain above the city where the savior will weep. Even in the midst of a cloud of uncertainty. Even on the floor of a midwestern church, where a woman weeps and a small girl gathers a book: in all of this we can take heart — for it is at the foot of the cross we see the face of God.

Amen.