

February 14, 2010 The Celebration of the Transfiguration of the Lord

Luke 9:18-27

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."

Luke 9:28-43

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, it isn't much different than in Luke; a little, but not much. If we had read out loud the scripture just before the story of the transfiguration, you would have heard about Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, and then when Jesus told the disciples what it meant to be the Messiah, Peter, who was shocked by what Jesus said, was in the next breath rebuked by Jesus when he tried to get Jesus to deny the cross. Then, eight days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John up the side of the mountain and when they reached the summit, Jesus changed. The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes which may or may not have been white when they started out, would have been considerably less white by the time they reached the top-- but all that was different now.

Then, as we all know at least by now, Moses and Elijah appeared out of the fog, there was a conversation, an offer of shelter for the unexpected guests and Jesus, and a voice out of the cloud identifying Jesus as the chosen one: not Moses, not Elijah, Jesus.

That's why the passage is important in terms of the development of Christian doctrine, at least in the earliest Church. It's a clear message to the church, the voice from the cloud confirmed Jesus as the Messiah. It also confirmed what Peter announced when Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?"

And that really is the pivot point of our faith isn't it? We have read about Jesus, in the Bible, at least, although there are a lot of other books that have been written, and will continue to be written about Jesus. That's because transfiguration is all about who you or I say Jesus is. And if we get the answer right, it is not Jesus who is transfigured, it is you or me.

Luke and the other gospel writers tried to make it clear to us in the story that followed. The story began when Jesus and the others came down from the mountain. Now-- it's important that you remember the sequence, and here's a rough cut of it: Jesus asked the question, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter answered correctly, the others thought Jesus might be John the Baptist or Elijah. After that Jesus and three of his disciples walked up the mountain and Jesus was transfigured (e.g. his face changed and his clothing became very white) and the voice from the cloud confirmed that of the three: Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. "Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' (not Moses, not Elijah...) When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone."

Then they descended and Jesus healed a child who had a seizure disorder. The issue there was about faith. It was about did they believe he could do it? It was pretty dramatic and not at all easy on the boy who right in the middle of the discussion about faith had a grand mal seizure. If you've never seen it, and its happening to somebody you love very much, it is one of the most frightening things you will ever see; and it may be the most useless and powerless you ever felt in your life.

And that is the moment you have to pose the question, do you believe that Jesus is the

Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God? I mean not in so many words, that's because in a moment of crisis that question might be the farthest away it can possibly be, or so close that you cannot think of anything-- anyone else but God; because your loved one is in the hands of God like at no other time. And here's the miracle: the outcome of that crisis has nothing to do with the presence of God. If you believe in God, then believe God is present; and do not depend on a particular outcome. I don't deny for a moment that there may be a miracle, but it is in the nature of miracles that they don't happen very often. Well they do, but because miracles, like life, and love, and grace, and the universe, happen so often, we don't really count them.

Remember, we don't really count miracles unless, when the story is told, a Hollywood special effects crew is required to put it on the big screen. But God is with us, and when we believe that, and understand that, then we are transfigured. We are no longer the same. It may not be as outwardly obvious as it was with Moses when he came down from Sinai, or as it was with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, but belief in the presence of God in our lives, in our world, in our universe, makes all the difference.

It's not just a matter that the glass is half full for the believer and half empty for the one who doesn't believe. In order to believe we must change; we must take that great impossible leap, and when we land we find that we have changed: a little, day by day, or a lot, all at once. Pardon the expression, but there's no right way, there's no formula. Let me give you a couple of examples. You may respond as I have to a series of crises, of events that have shaken you, surprised you. Perhaps you can recall instances of grace so wonderful as to be called amazing that have occurred in your life; or even that miracle, that rare one, the specific one we prayed for and SHAZAAM! There it was!

Or you may not perceive what I call a crisis to be a crisis, but simply offerings of life, sort of the price everybody pays for showing up, and simply living. You may not be able to point to a time in your life when you said, "That was the day, or the hour." or "It was this or that experience that changed my life." In fact you may not be able to recall a time when you did not believe in God, or a time in your life when you felt so wrapped up in God and God in you that what you really cannot recall is a time when God was not around.

It's all good, friends, and no matter which scenario best fits your experience.

The church is the container, the carrier of all this experience. For all of the wickedness we can find in the most elementary reading of church history, or the history of most religions-- and the modern day writers who claim to be atheists have been having a great time throwing the baby, that is faith and belief, out with the bath water-- which is the church. The church is that clay jar that Paul spoke of in what we call his Second Letter to the Corinthians. It is full of flaws and imperfections, often puffed up with a sense of self-righteousness that is all out of proportion to what it deserves. It is also full of people like us, also flawed and sometimes even self-righteous. But as we change-- transfigure-- so then church changes, and all of this through belief in God.

The thrust here is that faith can make all of the difference. How? It is the measure of how we are transfigured. Some believe that people cannot change, any more than the leopard can change its spots. If I believed that, I would be in a sorry state. If I believed that, I would have to support the death penalty not just for aggravated murder, but for dozens of other crimes-- because there would be no hope for rehabilitation; there would only be the expectation that once the person is released from prison-- look out! Best way to protect society is to keep 'em locked up. And I would call myself a reasonable man. I would call myself responsible in that I was looking out for the safety of family and friends.

And all of that would be based on the belief that people do not change and if that is true, then what can we say about transfiguration? (You know, it's not just for Messiahs! It's for people just like us.) It is available to people just like us, and if you stop and think about it, pray about it, participate in the church, yeah come on in and mix it up with the rest of us sinners, and don't worry, we won't corrupt you any more than you'll corrupt us, and who knows we might all find ourselves changing just because we got to know you and you us and one day someone will wake up and realize that he or she believes in God, and that it has made a substantial difference.

That it has made all of the difference, because someone was transfigured.