

Sermon, 18 February 2007—Last Sunday after Epiphany

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; First Corinthians 12:27—13:13; Luke 9:28-36

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany season, the season in which we reflect on the dawn of Jesus' ministry: his first sermons, his first disciples, his first miracles. In all three of the Synoptic Gospels—in Mark, Matthew, and Luke—and therefore in all three years of our Liturgical Calendar, this season reaches its climax with insight into Jesus' identity and into the shape of his mission, which will be ours as well, if we take up our cross and follow him. The story of the Transfiguration crowns the season as the dense depiction of these things: the person and purpose of Jesus fused into a brilliant picture that is intended to burn itself onto our retina and to remain faintly superimposed wherever we turn our gaze.

Mark gives us the essentials: a mountaintop apart, the inner circle of the first to trust, the dazzling transformation that simultaneously reveals two heroic prophets of Israel, long dead, on either side, the observant stupor, the inept offer, the Voice from heaven, and the final thunderous silence. Luke, as usual, gives these ingredients his own flavor: Jesus, the prophet is at prayer when he blazes forth, and the goal of his journey to Jerusalem is the topic of discussion. He is headed there for his “departure.”

This mysterious word is ironic, because the uninitiated reader cannot comprehend its meaning: if Jesus is to depart from Jerusalem, what is his ultimate travel destination? The informed reader knows that his departure *is* his destination, because the purpose for his trip to Jerusalem is the final prophetic proclamation that will end with his execution: at Jerusalem, Jesus will depart this life. But the Christian reader knows that another departure is meant, because death is not the end: Jesus will be raised to life again, and in his new life will visit his followers for forty days, and open their minds to

understand everything about him in Scripture and prepare them to proclaim the fulfillment of all prophecy in him and the forgiveness of sins to all people in his name; he finally accomplishes his departure by ascending into the heavens from the Mount of Olives, and leaves us staring at an empty sky.

However, even that does not crack the kernel of this word. In Greek, Luke says Jesus is going to Jerusalem to accomplish his “exodus.” The word simply means “departure,” but the presence of Moses with Jesus on the mountain reminds us that the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt is God’s paradigm of salvation. The enslaved children of Israel were brought out of Egypt by God’s mighty arm outstretched to save. This is the primal pattern of God’s relationship with those God has chosen. Now, on this mountain, Moses acknowledges that Jesus, the new Moses, is to lead a people to freedom also, “free to worship God with out fear,” because through him “the dawn from on high shall break upon us, shining on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and guiding our feet into the way of peace.” In this way, Luke depicts Jesus as the completion of the prophetic work of Israel, surpassing all the earlier prophets, whether liberators and legislators like Moses or protestors and denouncers like Elijah. And since both are in conversation with Jesus about what he has to achieve in Jerusalem, in this way also, Luke depicts Jesus’ Passion as the fulfillment, the focus, and the center, of all that is written in the Law and the Prophets.

The more we meditate on the Transfiguration scene, the more we realize that it is a hologram. It is that slice of Jesus’ story that contains the fully rounded totality. In it, in a single moment, everything that matters in the theological reflection of the Church about the person of Christ is held and displayed. When we contemplate it, we see the entirety of the Church’s

proclamation of Jesus' identity—not his ministry, nor his teaching, but his person—collected and compacted into one vision. The Voice from heaven announcing that he is “the Son, the Beloved,” makes present his Baptism. The two men on a mountaintop, one on either side of him, as he is displayed to his followers, who fall asleep rather than pray with him, and who collapse in terror at the dark descent of the cloud, make present the Crucifixion. The changed appearance and dazzling garments make present the Resurrection. All we need to know about him—that he is God's Son who aligns himself with us, that his death fulfills Scripture, and that his risen power, present and potent in our day, can be known to us—all that the Church proclaims and that we believe is collected in this vision, and can be known to us in prayer.

It is often said that Christ's divinity is what is displayed in the Transfiguration: the lights come up for one moment on the divinity of Jesus, hidden behind the flesh, just as lights come up behind a scrim in the theater, and what we thought was an opaque curtain is shown to be transparent, and we see fully illuminated all that goes on behind it. But a closer inspection of this story and the lesson we heard from Exodus overturns that. No one can see God and live. When Moses came down from Sinai, as we heard today, his face glowing, he had in fact asked to see God's glory, but even he was not allowed to see it directly. God instructed him to hide in a cleft in the rock, and as God passed by, calling out God's Name, God covered Moses with his hand to protect him, and then Moses saw the afterglow, the backside of God, as the Book of Exodus has it, but not God's face. That limited exposure was enough to ignite Moses' skin, so much so that his own brother was frightened, as the disciples were of Jesus. It is not the glory of God that is seen in Jesus, but the glory of the God-ignited person. And in Jesus, this inhabiting by divinity was not transient, but permanent. What is

revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration is what a God-infused person looks like.

The Transfiguration is not some private showing to an elite group, but a pledge. The ultimate purpose of Christ's life is not that we will know he is God, but that we will become like him. The reason for our Creation is transforming fellowship with God. We are to be equipped to receive God. We are to be converted into the companions of our Creator. Christ's Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection did not take place so that God could prove God had power to become incarnate, to pass through death, and to rise again. God didn't need to prove that to himself; and if God proves it to us, so what, if it doesn't touch us and change us? Jesus' life then becomes simply one more item on the lists of accomplishments of the Omnipotent. It is blasphemous to turn God into this self-absorbed performance artist, as if all God has done on our behalf God did simply to show us who God is and what God can do.

Nor has God acted merely to show how far we and God are from each other, how different from each other, how inaccessible and incompatible. We know that already. In the heart of our heart, that is our gnawing ongoing grief and terror: we are not God. We are powerless, battered by losses, covered with wounds we bandage during the day in public, but uncover in the dark of night alone, when we probe them and inspect them, dreading to find them hot with infection. We know we are not God, because we can do nothing to heal our self. It is blasphemous to claim that God simply wanted to show us how untouched God is by these poisons of ours.

Nor has God entered human history merely to give us correct data for religious affirmations and appropriate phrases for praise. There is no praise missing in heaven, where God's glory is completely revealed to the capacity

of each creature, who responds with all the adoration of which it is capable. It is blasphemous to assume that God only reaches out to us to make sure we get his address right.

There is no need in God; the need is in us. And what we need is not information about God, but transformation of our life. If we are given to know anything about God, it is so that our lives can be transfigured. And even that change in us is not into something unearthly, but simply into the likeness of the One who became one of us, but without sin. That is all. What God shows us is what God's intention was for humanity all along. Look at Jesus and see what human beings were made to be, what we were created to be, and what the love of God can empower you to be. Irenaeus of Lyons, the great warrior against heresy of the second century, said it this way: "the glory of God is the human being fully alive." This is God's desire for us—not that we remain sluggish with sleep, not that we propose building shrines to alien assignments of righteousness and external notions of holiness that have nothing to do with us, not that we collapse and give up in terror at the power of life, but that we wake up, that our thanks be active not reactive, that we rejoice even at a banquet with sinners as we pass through their town proclaiming the arrival of God's Reign, that we be fully alive.

The Gospel writers enshrined the hologram of the person and purpose of Christ in the mystery of the Transfiguration so that we can see what the fully alive human person is in God's eyes, so that our faulty vision can be healed, so the gap could be closed, so that our actions and choices might become Godlike, so that we can be made like him, our lostness found in baptism, our fallenness lifted up in crucifixion, our inertness and numbness and corruption restored to life in resurrection. Athanasius, the great archbishop of Alexandria of the fourth century, thought of it this way: God

lowered himself to take on our humanity so that we could be raised to share in God's divinity. On this occasion, on that mountain, Jesus' disciples saw the earnest money of the pledge God has made to us.

Our catastrophe is that we simply do not believe this—and that is why crucifixion can never be excluded from the mercy of God. It is the cheap grace that we want, the grace that costs us nothing; but grace on the cheap also provides nothing. We want a better life without changing our life. We prefer an external remote deity, that we think plays peek-a-boo at the Transfiguration, who could fix it all with a wave of the hand: if easy for God, then surely effortless for us. But we get what we pay for—that is a spiritual law—and the God we imagine worthy of our worship, that has nothing to do with us, so alien, so holy, so unlike us, has, in the end, nothing to do with us. The cross, not the miracles, remains the way God present among us is known; there were any number of miracle workers and always have been. The way the presence of God-with-us is known is the cross, as the arrangement of people on the Mount of Transfiguration reminds us. Not only Jesus' cross, but ours: when we have nothing left and are lifted high on our cross, that is when we know God-with-us. On that day, we can discover that God cannot be alienated from us. That is why crucifixion can never be excluded from the terrible compassion of God, who knows who you are in the moment you yourself are too terrified to know yourself, and who will not avert his gaze from the agony you yourself do not know how you can endure. That fearless steadiness is love itself, patient, kind, not insisting on his own way, not resentful, but rejoicing in the truth, and bearing all things, and never ending—never. That abyss of love which we come to know in our dereliction is the actuality, a palpable hands on grip, the steady undergirding arms, that were promised to us when we were proclaimed God's beloved

child at baptism. At that moment of light in darkness, of hope in despair, of life in death, the resurrection you sense at work in yourself, unfathomable and incomprehensible, is only the predawn glow of the day to come, because the purpose of your life, dear sisters and brothers, is to walk in that endless day, the light in which Jesus walked always, the peace and love of God.

What you are to see, contemplating the transfigured Christ, is transformed humanity, even you yourself. The Law and the Prophets gather around all people, supporting us on either side as we become like the one we follow, because it was for our sake that they were given, to call us back to God, to accomplish our departure, our exodus, from the Egypt of our life, into a land promised to us, flowing with milk and honey, where our song is to be “Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah,” through all eternity, as we are raised up into the glorious life of the Holy Trinity, whom we praise as our Eternal Source, our Only-begotten Word, and our Life-giving Spirit, one God, today and always.