

Sermon, 3 February 2008—Final Sunday after Epiphany

Exodus 24:12-8; Psalm 2; Second Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

When Sakyamuni, the Buddha, stood up after his enlightenment under the banyan tree, he set out to return to human settlements. As he walked along the road, a man approached from the opposite direction. When the man drew close to the Buddha, he stopped, struck by the Buddha's peace and radiance. "What are you?" he asked; "are you a god?"

"No," said Sakyamuni.

"Are you a supernatural being or a wizard?"

The Buddha answered, "No."

"Surely you aren't an ordinary man, are you?"

"No."

"Well," said the man, "what are you?"

The Buddha said, "I am awake."

This story and the Gospel account of the Transfiguration share the same function and the same static hieratic quality: an announcement disguised as a narrative, doxology slipped past us as a dialogue, a creed couched as an event. At a human level, nothing "happens" in these stories: something is seen, something is heard, but nothing is done, and no action is taken. In both of them, the arresting luminosity of the human being who has become the recipient of our devotion is depicted, and the source of that luminosity is named. These are retrospective formulations, with all the signs of being constructed after the focus figure has become the object of religious dogma. If I can put it crassly, these are stories in which a champion salesman displays and names the brand he is offering to you for purchase.

That is, of course, their catastrophe. These stories, as preserved, overshoot the reason they were originally remembered; their splendor defeats us. Rather than being stimulated to reach for the qualities Buddha and Jesus display, we sink under the weight of their glory in abject adoration. Here is the Son of God, flanked by the Law and the Prophets. Here is the Voice of God, proclaiming favor and pleasure in the son and summoning all to pay attention. Here is the Glory of God, descending as a cloud upon this mountain, just as it did on Mount Sinai, and just as it did afterwards on the Tabernacle that the People of Israel built for worship in the wilderness of Sinai, into which Moses went to converse with God. Jesus *is* the *new* Tent of Meeting, in whom we and God speak to each other, so the Heavenly Voice tells us to listen to him. How can Peter chatter about throwing together some shacks to contain such implacable heavy glory?

But that exposure of Peter's confusion is the contrasting and subversive point. The Gospel account is truthful enough to build into the story the suggestion that human beings are quick to make every time divinity lifts our lid and looms over us, or rolls beneath us, tossing into shambles what we've arranged, or presses itself into the flat surface of our world from behind, causing it to bulge out towards us and buckle and crack. "Holy One, we prefer you in a box. We will visit; we will worship; we will decorate; but we prefer the peace that never gets past our understanding."

So that has been the fate of this story as well: we enshrine it. The danger to us is that we will become entranced by the assertion it depicts; our peril is to let our insight satisfy us. That was the temptation to which Peter eagerly yielded: let's build booths and stay up here. Let the theological implications be sufficient: let right worship and right doctrine be enough, and let human beings remain abject, subservient, humble, devout. It will be

good for us, we claim, to treat this story as a glittering gorgeous icon, remote and awesome, the glory of divinity glimpsed through a parted curtain.

Both in Buddhism and Christianity, that maneuver, that evasion of our human spiritual maturity, is repudiated. In both cases, the story is actually told to alert us to our human potential. In both cases, the story is a promise and a warning: it is a vision of fulfilled humanity and of the glory available to us, and it is a caution about our blindness and indolence.

Listen to another Buddhist story. Sakyamuni, the Buddha, was seated in contemplation with his disciples. The gentle simple Ananda, is seated before him, devoted to him, staring at him, enraptured, entranced, rapt.

The Buddha's open eyes turn to Ananda, and Sakyamuni asks, "What are you staring at, Ananda?"

Ananda replies, "You, glorious one."

"Do not contemplate *me*, Ananda," the Buddha says; "contemplate what I teach. You cannot even truly see me. If you wish to see me, you must see the truth of your own mind. The one who sees the truth of the mind sees me."

The story of the Transfiguration is the demonstration of the glory of divinity dwelling in the human being who is fully alive, transparent, without impediment, open to God. This is what Adam and Eve were created to be, and this is the glory of the saints in light. This is human Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our ending. This, said the ancient teachers of the Church, is the depiction of our deification: Christ humbled himself to share our humanity so that we might be raised to share his divinity. This is the human person without sin, who can be manifest, not only as the image of God, but as the restored and radiant likeness of God, which we damaged and sullied when we succumbed to the lure of evil and death.

The danger is for us to follow the lead of the Lectionary and to treat the transfiguration story in isolation, that is, to follow Peter's lead and to consent to being spellbound by glory, hypnotized by this tremendous and fascinating mystery, the terrifying and attractive power of its unveiled Spirit.

The Gospel writers themselves seem to have yielded to the temptation Peter fell prey to and expressed in his eagerness to enshrine Jesus' singular glorification; they even seem to tempt us by the way the story is constructed. But the truth is that these writers also effectively undermine that temptation by the context into which they put the story. In the three Gospels in which it appears, the story of the transfiguration is flanked identically. In all three, immediately *before* the Transfiguration, Peter says that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus announces that the Son of Man must be handed over, must be crucified, and must be raised, and that those who wish to come after him, must take up their own cross and follow. In all three, immediately *after* the Transfiguration, Jesus descends from the mountain to find his disciples unable to heal an epileptic boy, whom he heals and restores to his father.

These episodes in sequence—when Jesus predicts his Passion, when he is transfigured, when he heals the epileptic boy—all include a challenge to and a correction of the disciples, even when that occurs in the subtle quiet ways it does on the Mount of Transfiguration. Before and after Jesus' Transfiguration, the disciples fail to take in, even reject, the risky human location of ministry, which is where Jesus has chosen to commit himself, and so they fail to recognize the promise of transformation that is made to all those willing to take such a life on and to act in surrender to God's will.

The cost of discipleship is terrifying: if you are to follow Jesus, you must take up *your* cross, as he does his. Remember, in Mark and Matthew, Peter protests that crucifixion will never happen to Jesus, and Jesus calls him

Satan, and then says to all his followers, “If you seek to save your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for the sake of the Gospel—that is, as I do—you will save it.” It is a call to die to the world; that is the true imitation of Christ. You don’t need me to say that not even saints were safe when they acted on utter self-denial, and that the violent imposition of our will on others “for their own good” is never of God. Clarity of purpose and conviction are also the qualities of demons; doubt, rather than certainty, is the gift of God, because it keeps us turned to God.

In two of the Gospels, after Jesus heals the epileptic boy, the response of his disciples is petulance: why couldn’t they drive the demon out, they want to know. Luke seems to have been too embarrassed on their behalf to record this whining and suppresses both their pout and Jesus’ reprimand. In Matthew, Jesus answers that it is their lack of faith; in Mark, Jesus curtly says that “this kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.” In either case, the disciples’ question tells us everything we need to know about what the problem is: “why couldn’t *we* cast it out?” Their protective self-regard in ministry, their submerged envy and irritation, their self-importance has led to their impotence. This uncomfortable resentment at human limitation keeps them from becoming the image of human glorification that is revealed in Jesus on the mountain.

When this man, then, who faces his own cross and death, who fasts and prays and who uses the power accumulated from that discipline to heal others, when this man shows three chosen followers how glorious it is to live this way, how it calls forth the Law and Prophets in testimony and support of it, how it pleases God, who calls the one who lives in such self-surrender a beloved son and who descends in glory upon that life, when Jesus shows all this to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter would

rather draw up architectural drawings for a worship complex! All Jesus can do is reassure the three with a touch, and tell them not to be afraid—but what they are not to be afraid of is this fullness of power, this weight of glory, that God is always ready to entrust to humanity.

Of course, that is not the right way to say that. Perhaps Jesus did not display himself. This is, after all, a story formulated to be the most enriched and dense depiction of what he means, of what he signifies, of who he is, recalled and elaborated after his Resurrection. Perhaps, then, it is in every sense a depiction of what others saw and still see in him: the one who did not fear death, the one who cast out demons by curtailing his own appetites, the one who called others to follow him on this path, the one who touched them and urged them to get up and not to be afraid. When they saw that this way of being human had been raised to new and empowering life in his Resurrection, then they knew that what they had all along seen in him was the glory of God. May we, who recoil from our cross and who struggle and dispute and fail to heal others in the valley, be called up to the heights, where we can discern the likeness of God in what we are called to be, and be for others a revelation of the light of God, Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, the One whom we praise today and hope to praise with unveiled faces forever.