

Last Epiphany C – Transfiguration  
World Mission Sunday

February 14, 2010

St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's

Exodus 34.29-35

Ps 99

2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2

Luke 9.28-36 (37-43)

As you may know, the vestry met in retreat last weekend in Forks at the Miller Tree Inn. We knew we'd be inundated with visitors to the bed and breakfast which has become known as the Cullen House in the *Twilight* series of books and now movies. Edward, the vampire heartthrob, lives there. And indeed, in the living room, there is a life-size cardboard cutout of Edward inside the window. So all manner of girls and assorted tourists come onto the porch to have their pictures taken with Edward through the window. It's pretty amazing. And I couldn't help remembering this week that one of the characteristics of these vampires is that they cannot be in the sunlight, because if they are, their skin will begin to sparkle and shine, which would give away their identity.

I'm not trying to make any real connection between Edward's sparkly skin and Jesus' transfigured face and dazzling white clothes, other than to realize that in both cases, the change helped us see the truth of the person; who each really was. Edward as a vampire. Jesus as God's son, God's chosen. That's about as far as we can take the comparison!

This reading of the Transfiguration always comes on the last Sunday of Epiphany as the season goes out in a blaze of glory with an incredible mountaintop experience.

Luke begins his story with interesting words *Now about eight days after these sayings...* Well, what would those sayings be? The first part of the ninth chapter of Luke is essentially bypassed in the lectionary this year, so we arrive at this point not knowing those sayings and I'm guessing Luke wants us to remember. Jesus had called the twelve together and given them power and authority over demons and disease, Herod is getting more worried about who Jesus is, there was the feeding of the 5000 when Jesus said to the disciples "YOU give them something to eat," Peter has confessed that Jesus is the messiah, and Jesus has made the first of three predictions of his suffering and death. All that in the previous 27 verses. No surprise that Peter and James and John were weighed down with sleep.

I wonder what they were thinking that day when Jesus took them up onto the mountain to pray. Did they expect to have some intimate conversation just the four of them, away from the crowds which were always pressing? A chance to ask him privately about the scary stuff he had been telling them about suffering and dying and saving or losing their lives? They must have been exhausted by the nonstop demands of the crowds.

Heidi Neumark writes in *The Christian Century* that when they finally do get a day off, it doesn't feel much like a vacation and they struggle with staying awake. Jesus has told them not only about his upcoming great suffering, rejection and death (treatment they can expect as well), but about his rising on the third day. I don't blame them for missing the rising part. When you think you're heading for the dungeon, anxiety and panic tend to block everything else out. No wonder Peter wanted to linger up there for a while and pitch some tents.

Henri Nouwen says that this story of the transfiguration of Christ functions as something of an icon; it offers access through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. Something extraordinary and incomprehensible came to pass. Their friend and teacher was glorified. Luke uses the Greek work *doxa* for glory; and only here. It's where we get the word doxology. It is a deeply holy glory and awe and reverence that we are shown.

But the mountain top experience for Jesus was no escape and the disciples had to learn to listen to him and not just hang onto moments of glory but to use them as strength and encouragement in the hardships to come. Over and over again the glory is tempered with the reality of suffering. God's glory is not just for the mountaintops but for the foot of the mountains too, where human need cries out for help and God's glory can be revealed. The gospel ended with the words "and all were astounded at the greatness of God." That was not on the mountaintop, but in the valley when an epileptic boy was healed and a distraught father comforted.

Today we are on the threshold of Lent, a season of self-denial and intentional introspection in order that we might be more faithful disciples. It's a time of transition for us that is echoed in the moment of transition for the disciples. Rosalind Brown wonders what it must have been like to come from the glory and wonder of the transfiguration to the bedlam of the crowd. The contrast could not have been greater. And in some senses, the transition we face cannot be greater – we have been immersed in the revelation of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ, and suddenly on Wednesday we'll be picked up by the scruff of our necks, turned around and put face to face with the sin of the world and our own contribution to it.

This is a hinge day in the calendar of the church year; as sharp a change from Sunday to Wednesday as we will see. Because we're going to experience the contrasts and they are hard for us to reconcile. When Jesus is up on that mountaintop in all of his glory, we know that he is God's Son; the chosen one. However, seeing him dying on the cross, we might not be so sure about him, writes Brian Stoffregen. Hearing that voice from heaven, we would know Jesus is God's son. However, when we hear nothing; the silence on Good Friday, the silence in the dark and dry places of our lives, we might wonder about Jesus. When Moses and Elijah are at his side, he is really somebody special. However, when it's two convicted criminals, we're not so sure. When Jesus heals the sick and raises the dead, we know his power. When our friends and loved ones become sick or

die, we question if Jesus has the power to do anything for us. On the mountain it was easy to believe. At the cross, it may feel impossible.

We would like to avoid the ongoing cross-carrying journey which is demanded of disciples. But it is the mission of the church to work in the valleys, fueled by the mountaintops. If we are people transfigured by what we have received, then we are compelled offer these wonders to a needy world.

You may not know this, but since 1835 the official name of the Episcopal Church has been the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. DFMS. You see it on official church publications. Most Episcopalians don't think much about mission when we think of the church; we're perhaps unaffectionately nicknamed The Frozen Chosen. And yet all our readings today are about mission and our work off the mountain, as they are nearly every Sunday.

In Exodus we hear about Moses coming down the mountain with two tablets in his hands. They were not for him to hold onto and feel privileged to have witnessed the face of God. God had given him the ten best ways to live, about how to be in right relationship with God and with each other. You can't keep that to yourself. You must share that with the world. Moses was on a mission the entire time he led Israel out of captivity in Egypt. God mixing in the very real lives of people.

In Jesus' exodus, he is not departing, he is leading us out of sin into salvation. We follow him through prayer, praise and worship, faithfulness and mission. Today the church celebrates World Mission Sunday as you see in your bulletin insert. Emil Brunner, a Swiss theologian, wrote that *the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning*. No mission, no church.

We've tried for generations to make the church into a social club with dues and a comfortable chaplaincy, but churches which ignore the call to active mission dwindle and die. Churches large or small that make mission a focus will thrive. During the vestry's time at the Cullen House last weekend, one of two goals it identified was outreach; intentional, need-identified mission into our community. You'll be hearing more about it over the next weeks and months as the vestry solicits your thoughts, suggestions, and prayer for what St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's next mission focus will be.

It's a good way to enter into Lent; a season filled with prayer and meditation, fasting, repentance and study. It is a time particularly suited for moving from mountaintop to valley and listening to Jesus. It is a time to honestly look at ourselves, sometimes with the help of a confessor, to recognize and own up to our shortcomings, and look with hope toward the return of the light when Christ is risen from the grave.

If we are willing, we will find Lent to be a season bent toward silence. Some things in our liturgy will change. The music will be more subdued, there will be no Gloria or alleluias and the blessing is solemn. There are longer periods of silence in a more

penitential liturgy. Jesus will come down from the mountain and turn his face toward Jerusalem and his exodus and take us with him if we dare.

But for today, this last Sunday in Epiphany, the light which shines on Jesus is radiant. We are given a glimpse of the future when Christ will be glorified and raised to new light. Our lives can be transfigured as Paul writes by seeing the glory of the Lord and being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. As we enter Lent and make our way to the Cross, remember the glory.

Gail Wheatley+