

Transfiguration Sunday

Sermon 2.7.16

Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35
Luke 9:28-43

This is one of those stories that we hear every year. The Transfiguration: this is a story we hear every year on the last Sunday of Epiphany just before we begin Lent. A crucial occurrence in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Transfiguration of Jesus on this unnamed mountaintop serves as the hinge between our following Jesus during his life and in the early days of his ministry and our following him to his death.

It was a short trip through Jesus' life and ministry this year. The season of Epiphany was short—a mere five Sundays between the last Sunday of the two-week season of Christmas and the first Sunday of the six-week season of Lent. Easter is early this year, and Christmas was on exactly the same day as always. The season that serves as an accordion, expanding and contracting as needed given the fixity of Christmas and fluctuation of Easter, is Epiphany. Last year, it was long, because Easter was late: it was as long as it can be, nine weeks. This year it's almost as short as it ever is: five weeks. (It can be as few as four.) So, for this reason, we might feel just as Peter seems to have felt. Not quite ready to move on, not quite ready to begin the journey to the cross with Jesus, Peter had this to say on that unnamed mountaintop: “Master, it is good for us to be here; let's make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

He said this not knowing what he said, the story notes. Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, after all, having only managed (and just barely) to stay awake. It had been a long climb, perhaps, up that mountain. And it had been an overwhelming, exhausting perhaps, few weeks (or was it months?) since they'd begun to follow Jesus. They'd been called and gathered, commissioned and sent out; they'd been given authority over unclean spirits, the power to heal, the power to teach. And they'd gone all over the place, all over Galilee, back and forth across the lake. And then, most recently, while praying with Jesus, Jesus had asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” and then, “Who do *you* say that I am?” And the people had all sorts of answers—that he was Elijah or one of the prophets or even John the baptizer. (John had been, not long ago, beheaded, so some supposed Jesus was him come back from the dead.) But Peter said, “You are the Messiah of God, the anointed one of God.”

What that meant to Peter is not known, not knowable. But we can entertain some ideas.

To be the Messiah is to be the one with ultimate power, ultimate authority (or at least *penultimate*). He'd be the one to bring justice to the long-suffering Israelites. He'd be the one to

establish them mightily in their own land, setting low their enemies and raising high this people so often humiliated and now staging a comeback. Peter maybe supposed Jesus would bring recompense, payback. And as for all those acts of healing, all the feeding the hungry and cleansing the unclean: all that was maybe to get the people on his side, his own nation at his back. All that wonder-working was by way of winning the people over, establishing his brand.

Or maybe Peter wasn't so cynical. Maybe he could see the intrinsic value in all that Jesus was doing, and maybe he assumed (happily, hopefully) it would continue indefinitely. Sure, because if Jesus *was* the Messiah, the anointed one of God, there'd be no stopping what good works he would do, what good works *they* would do. They could just go on and on in surprising, delightful righteousness, until they were old men together, wandering and wonder-working and making people feel *better*.

But after this sudden insight—that Jesus is the Messiah (or perhaps it wasn't so sudden, but instead a slow-dawning realization that something deeply alien was going on within and all about his friend); after this, Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. He said this, according to Luke, immediately following Peter's insight.

But it wasn't even just that. It wasn't just that *Jesus* would suffer and die and be raised. There was also this, which Jesus told them as well: "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

It was all pretty bewildering, I imagine: first overwhelming, eventually exhausting, and now this, bewildering. Suffering? *Suffering?* For the Messiah? It just doesn't make any sense. What's more, it sounds pretty scary, downright frightening. Remember, the cross was no mere symbol then. People didn't wear them on gold chains around their necks. Neither the contemporaneous equivalent of pious church ladies nor rebellious rock stars, to say nothing of the types of people in between: really, *no* one thought of crosses as adornment. Rather, the cross was real and it was terrifying. Like wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with an image of an ISIS fighter holding a human head, there was nothing pacifying, or even simply provocative, about the notion of carrying around a cross. It was to align with the enemy, with *evil*. It was to accept terroristic rule.

Opossums "play dead" when faced with fear; an existential threat has them fast asleep. Perhaps the same goes for disciples. "Weighted down with sleep," it's said they were. And so weighted down, Peter was apparently unguarded in uttering what he (it seems) hadn't meant to say: "Master, it is good for us to be here." In essence, "Let's stay here. Let's *stay* here. I'll build you three

dwelling places. Let's stay *here*." They were awake enough to witness the awesome sight, and to identify the two men who were suddenly with Jesus, talking to him. Moses and Elijah, these two, of course, were—there as if to represent the Law and the Prophets, as if to underscore a continuity in religious experience between the first covenant and whatever would come next. Jesus wasn't a radical break from what had come before, but was a continuation of the revelation of God-with-us, a continuation of the promises of God-among-us. And so Peter proposed: three dwelling places so we can all just stay here.

Whoops. Bad idea. Or at least wrong idea.

So goes the preaching around this story. So goes the preaching: Peter was wrong, and so might be we who'd rather sit in worship, fussing over our sanctuaries and our worship styles, worrying over our budgets (not to mention our outfits), rather than getting to the work of the gospel. So it goes that the lesson to be learned of this lesson is thus: "Enough sitting around. It's time to get back to work." Really, we preachers often take Peter to task for his wanting to stay and to be dazzled rather than to head back down the mountain where people in real need await relief, where good works that make life better for people await being done, where those condemned to despair or isolation await salvation and restoration, where a fractured world awaits reconciliation. Why, there's even a hymn that preaches this point: "Strengthened by this glimpse of glory, fearful lest our faith decline, we, like Peter, find it tempting to remain and build a shrine. But true worship gives us courage to proclaim what we profess, that our daily lives may prove us people of the God we bless."

It's a good preaching point. God knows I've made it often enough. It's a good message certainly for any church that confuses its church building with the Church as body gathered to serve as Christ. It's a good message for any seeker who wants to be inspired but much less so to be commissioned. It's a fine thing to point out about Peter to any of the privileged class who mean also to be Christian: that such a thing—to be Christian—will lay a claim on you.

But today, I don't see in Peter's longing to stay on the mountain a shirking of duty as much as much I sense fear of what that duty shall be. Today, I don't see Peter as lazy, I see him as afraid. ("What have I gotten myself into?") And for this I feel for him. What's worse, though, is that his fear is compounded when, having said what he hadn't meant to say ("It's good for us to be here..."), a cloud came and overshadowed him and the others on that mountain. And they were terrified, the story says, as they entered that cloud. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, Peter, once perhaps afraid of the cross that he was apparently daily to take up, now had this to fear as well

and maybe more so: a cloud swallowing him up, just like as happened to Moses. And hadn't he had to cover up his own face in order not to dazzle to death the people he meant to serve? It was lucky he (Moses) hadn't been stuck dead at seeing God's face. Isn't this what had long been warned would happen? "No one sees the face of God and lives." Isn't that what had been said? Right there, in Exodus. So, Moses survived. But who was Peter? I mean, he was no *Moses!* And yet here came that cloud.

Terrified.

It doesn't help us in our reading of the story (to say nothing of our re-reading of the story) that we know what's to happen in that cloud. A voice, simply a voice: it doesn't help us honor Peter's experience of it all, knowing that the only thing in that cloud was a voice. No being struck down, no being turned to a pillar of salt: all that was there was a voice calm and clear: "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him." To know how a story ends: this is to make it more difficult to enter into the story as it unfolds.

And this can be a good thing. To know how the story ends is to take the anxiety out of the story unfolding: this can be a good thing. Really this is what's meant by (spoiler alert!) our knowing by faith the way this whole story ends: in goodness, in glory, in reconciliation and eternal life. To know this as the end toward which all that is, is moving (for God being at work in all things for good): this takes out some of the sting of the slings and arrows of life; it gives relief to some of the fear and the anxiety and even the terror.

But Peter didn't have the benefit of watching others go through this so to know that all he'd encounter inside that cloud was a voice—and that this voice might be well meaning and wise, sustaining and inspiring. He didn't have the benefit of hearing this story every year. So, no, this was terrifying—nearly as terrifying as the cross.

Worst of all, it was a voice that pointed them back in the direction of the cross. It was a voice that put them once again on the pathway to the cross. "This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him." For this is what they were to listen to. This is what Jesus is remembered to have said last: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering..." and "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." This is what they were to listen to him say: talk of the cross, talk of self-giving love instead of, for example, survival at all costs.

It's significant, I'd bet, that the first act of compassion Jesus performed after coming back down the mountain (which Peter probably saw) was to save a son at the request of his father from a

spirit that possessed the boy violently. The father even called his son what Jesus would be called of his Father: my son, my only child. The singularity of this one, the only-ness of him: this increases the urgency of the need and the worry of the father. It's as if Luke wants us to know (in his word choice) that Jesus knew—could now suddenly see—that God had something at stake in his having sent his Son (his only Son) into a world where spirits of all sorts ruled, and often violently. It wasn't just the Holy Spirit who reigned in this world; it's also some quite unholy ones. And yet God would send his Son, his only Son, to take them on.

The grief and fear of this father for his son: it's to give image perhaps to the grief and fear of the father in heaven for his son sent to the world in order to save it from itself.

In sum, Jesus is facing some terrifying circumstances, and Peter is facing some terrifying circumstances, and so apparently is our Father who art in Heaven. And that all of this might have frightened Peter means that Peter now *really* understood.

The only way through is *through*.

True for them who would save us: true for us that we might be saved—from our violence, from our survival-at-any-cost urges, from repercussions that repercuss and repercuress unless someone finally decides to cease and desist, unless someone finally decides to take the final blow and to let the fight be finished and perhaps even to forgive, unless someone decides to be the final sacrifice in a history full of holocausts, so-called burnt offerings made to the Lord.

That's what the word used to mean, you know. A holocaust was a burnt offering made to the Lord to atone for sin. Its current use, of course, has nothing of God in it. The Holocaust has nothing to do with a sacred offering to God. *The Holocaust* is all about nihilism and evil. But the turning of the word on its head is a fascinating turn: it calls into question if any holocaust ever did. Were burnt offerings and sin offerings ever as essential to God as they were imperative to people?

Jesus suggests no, and Jesus means to have been the final sacrifice, the one whose death brings to an end such sacred killing. That it didn't might seem like a tragedy. That it didn't even as regards the Church, which has committed violence on an historic scale, might seem like more evidence of the existence and persistence of the devil than we'd ever want to have. That it didn't—that Jesus' self-giving to death didn't end the human compulsion to use violence to save us from violence—is perhaps, though, simply a sign that we have more work to do. We are not finished. We are not complete. God is yet working God's purpose out as regards us, as regards each of us and all of us and God's whole world. The catharsis we might hope the cross of Christ to have been on that so-called Good Friday isn't going to be a catharsis, sudden and cleansing, but a call to which we are

to respond: no more acts of violence in the faith that this will save us. No, for what will save us is faith that God will save us—faith that comes by grace.

Tobias asked me the other day if I believe world peace will ever be won. “No,” I said. There will always be someone, some group, that stokes its own sense of grievance and resentment, that arms itself against such grievance ever happening again, and that seeks vengeance. It will happen between nations and tribes, it will happen within families, even between brothers. And you can’t enforce otherwise, because then it’s you who’ll be seeking vengeance.

No, world peace won’t happen.

But the hope that it might is why I preach: because each of us must decide for ourselves to lay down our arms, to put off our defenses, and to work for reconciliation where there is now strife. We must each come to that decision, and not just once and for all, but daily.

The only way I know how to make such a terrifying, self-giving decision is to present a case for it, and a witness, the best of which is Christ, but a close second is Peter. Poor, terrified Peter: he’d gotten himself into something he had no notion of. And now it was too late. Sure, he might have stayed on that mountain, but Jesus and Elijah and Moses were moving on, going back down. The choice was his.

I realize now that the story doesn’t say what he did. He’s actually not mentioned in the event that follows this, Jesus encountering that grieving, frightened father of his suffering son. Peter isn’t said to be there.

Funny.

Thanks be to God.