

Last Sunday after Epiphany - The Transfiguration
Year C - 3/3/2019

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Those who are attentive to small things might have noticed something about today's Gospel passage. You see, our lectionary gives us the option today as to whether to read just the first part of the story - verses 28 to 36, and then stop there; or to continue on to verse 43. The last 7 verses are in brackets - it is the choice of the preacher as to whether to read them or not (and therefore, presumably whether to preach on them or not).

I must admit I was tempted to read just the primary verses of this Sunday's appointed passage and save the remainder for another time. My initial thought, was that the two discreet scenes appear to have little to do with each other. The first, after all, is about the transfiguration, Luke's take on the dramatic mountaintop encounter between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, The second, however, is a more ordinary scene of Jesus responding to human need back in the valley.

And given that the story of the Transfiguration is always our Gospel for this the last Sunday before Lent, and I understand it as a sort of bridge between the season of Epiphany which we finish, and Lent which starts on Wednesday, I have tended just to focus on the first 8 verses of the Gospel. However, as I prepared this week I began to understand how, in fact the second half of the story - those verses bracketed out - actually have everything to do with each other and, more importantly, how we imagine what we do on Sunday morning.

Christian tradition typically describes Luke as a physician. Perhaps that's true, but I think he may also have been a pastor. A pastor keenly interested in and attentive to the life and worship of his community.

Notice that from the beginning of his Gospel, Luke is interested in inviting his community - in this case in the person of Theophilus (perhaps an early leader or patron of the Christians for whom Luke is writing) - to a deeper engagement with their faith.

Luke is writing his whole Gospel, he says, so that his community may be confident of the things they have already heard and learned (1:4). (“Confidence” or “certainty” is probably a better rendering of the Greek word often translated simply as “truth”.) Luke, that is, writes for people who have heard the faith and come to believe but want, yearn, and hunger to understand more deeply. He’s doing what we might call these days catechesis, or teaching.

So, here in nearly the exact middle of Luke’s Gospel, I think he is instructing us about something very important - and that is the nature of worship. Notice that Luke alone, for instance, describes Jesus as going up the mountain to pray. Moreover, his journey to prayer on the mountain is on the “eighth day after these sayings” - the eighth day came very quickly in Christian tradition to refer to Sunday, the day of resurrection and worship, the first day of a new week and era. Jesus discusses with Moses and Elijah his impending crucifixion. And the voice from heaven is directed not to Jesus but to the disciples with the injunction, “Listen to him.”

While this is not the clear pattern of worship outlined in, for example, the breaking of the bread in the Emmaus story later in Luke’s Gospel, this combination of prayer; discussion focused on the cross; and the command to listen; all taking place on the eighth day should at least kindle our liturgical imagination, reminding us of what our worship on a Sunday can or perhaps should be like.

Which is why the next scene and second half of this week’s passage is so important.

Because the retreat to worship and the time to listen to the Word, to be immersed in the cross, and be gathered in prayer leads inevitably to a return to the “everyday world” of human need where Jesus heals the sick and opposes the forces of evil.

If worship is a retreat, in other words, it is not a retreat from the world but a retreat in order to come *back* to the world in love, mercy and grace.

This, I believe, is what worship is meant to be, a moment of reflection, immersion, companionship, and prayer in order that we might embrace our callings in the world to respond to the needs of God's beloved children with renewed energy, confidence, and determination.

But do we see our hour on worship each Sunday in these terms? I wonder. How many of us come out of routine or obligation? How many who attend church do so because they want a brief escape from hectic pace of their lives? While acknowledging the fact that there are a variety of motivations people have for coming to church, I also want to offer a vision that church can be so much more. Worship can be the place where we hear God's voice, focus on the nature of grace as we experience it in the cross, meet each other in prayer and song, and leave renewed for lives of meaning and purpose that come through service to neighbor.

That's why the liturgist, Charles Sherlock, emphasizes so much in his book on the shape of the liturgy the "sending out" - just that last part of the service after communion. Without this, he says, we risk misunderstanding all that has gone before. We might be tempted to think that we have done all this that has come before that just to remember; to re-enact - just to worship. In fact, all we have done before culminates in our prayer "send us out in the power of your Spirit"...

What a difference this renewed understanding might make to us and, even more, to all the corners of the community and world we touch!

Well, that's what our Gospel, in its entirety this morning, reminds us; that we are God's beloved children, that God has in Jesus' cross and resurrection revealed just how much God loves us and that this love conquers all, and has called, commissioned, and equipped us to make a difference in the lives of those around us.

Mountain tops are wonderful places. Mountain tops can help us feel close to God. We long for mountaintops. We need them. However, as permanent as the image of a mountain appears to be, mountaintops are fleeting. Mountaintops are temporary. Mountaintops are momentary. And what is different in Luke's Transfiguration account is the radical revelation of a mountaintop experience that is then interrupted by the urgency of reality.

Luke reminds us that our proclamation of the good news will elicit real need. Are we ready to handle that? Are we ready to embody that? There's a lot of terrain between hills and valleys, mountaintop experiences and the trenches of real life, the highs and lows of human existence.

What we do here together, each week, each time we gather, is that we are fed - fed so that we might be sent out into the real world, to life lived on the plain. May we be strengthened, inspired, renewed and restored, that we go from this place filled with God's love and Grace, ready to serve those whom we meet with love and mercy.

Amen