

Last Epiphany (Transfiguration) Yr. A

February 26, 2017

Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-19

One of my daughters recently moved and in an e-mail conversation with her sister, the suggestion was made that she should, as soon as possible, find all the neat places, like a coffee shop and a book store and a ramen noodle shop (who knew?) So, favorite places.

Two of today's readings are about places, not favorite places, but what the Celts called "thin" places. Places in the universe where the barrier between our world and the realm of the spirit is translucent. According to one Irish saying, "heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter." That's what's going on in both the Exodus reading and in Matthew's telling of the Transfiguration.

For the entire season of epiphany, we've been celebrating God's willingness to make himself known to us. So, it's fitting that on this last Sunday of Epiphany, we hear readings about the glory of God breaking through and becoming visible to humans. We've heard only part of the Moses story, which tells us that the "glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people." You'll remember that when Moses came down from the mountain, after having seen God, a later text says that "the skin of his face was shining" and that whenever Moses spoke with the Lord his face would be so radiant with light that he had to cover it with a veil. Moses was transfigured by being in the presence of the living God.

The NT tells us that the same thing happened to Jesus. As three of the disciples watched, Jesus changed before their eyes. His face, indeed his whole body, "became dazzlingly white."

Transfiguration – to be transformed, to be given a new and exalted spiritual appearance. Well, we think, that's fine for Moses and Jesus but when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he reminded them that this is about us, too:

And we, who with veiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Transfiguration is about us, too. So it's perhaps instructive to look at how the Israelites and the three disciples reacted when they found themselves in the presence of God. In both cases, the text says that they were afraid. In the OT reading, the Israelites were reassured when Moses called Aaron and some of the other leaders over to him and nothing happened to them. In the Matthew reading, Jesus came over to Peter, James and John and touched them and said, "Get up and do not be afraid." We've heard that phrase over and over, whenever the human and the divine intersect. Don't be afraid.

In the case of the Transfiguration, scholars think that the disciples were given this vision of God's world and of who Jesus really was, so that when Jesus was crucified, they'd have a deeper understanding of what was going on. But maybe the deeper, timeless meaning is about life in general in which case, Jesus would be saying – get rid of all the fear in your lives. Now

that you've seen REALITY, you can understand that fear is completely unnecessary – now that you've seen things on their deepest level, you never have to be afraid again.

The clergy retreat was the first three days of this past week. The presenter is a theologian at St. Stephen's college at Oxford and his theme was God's delight. I must confess that when he began, with the early Greeks and their view of the world that placed the earth in the center, I thought, "it may be a long three days." But he was really terrific. He showed power point slides while he talked and, while the first slide was the view of the Greek's vision of the world, the second was of a big, old wardrobe. I did wonder how he was going to make the connection and he made it around the concept of delight, reminding us of C.S. Lewis's book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It's probably a while since you've read it, so I'll remind you that four English children walk through the back of a wardrobe into the Kingdom of Narnia. And, while there, they were confronted with the necessity of choice – to opt for goodness and generosity and the delight than comes from living out God's vision, or the illusory "delight" that the world offers. You'll remember that Edmund, who's a rather nasty little fellow, stumbles into Narnia and is met with the wicked witch, who plies him with Turkish Delight – he wants more and more of it, even though it's making him sick, and the witch uses the pleasure he's taking in this false "delight" to get his cooperation to work against his brother and sisters. It's a perfect metaphor, really. The presenter pointed out that we're made for God and to take delight in God, but that we are tempted to find our delight in other things as well, things that will never satisfy, that, in spite of the fact that they're destroying us, keep us captivated.

He pointed out that in the medieval world, God was the source of all delight, which could otherwise be defined as goodness, or truth or beauty, and that humans found their delight in the pursuit of goodness. It's doubtful that everyone lived that way, of course, but that was the cultural and religious narrative. By contrast, he pointed out, our culture today tells us that the one over-riding good is choice – we must construct our own meaning and happiness will be found only when we're free from all external constraints, especially the constraints that religion would urge upon us. And the current narrative also tells us that happiness is found in consumption. But, like Edmund, we eventually find that that consumption isn't ultimately satisfying, that, in fact, it makes us sick. And, if we expand our consumption over time and add to that the fact that more and more countries want a life-style that allows for that same standard of consumption, it's all completely unsustainable and can lead to the destruction of ourselves and our world.

Instead, he suggested, as Christians we're called to take delight in God and to construct communities of delight in which we can be formed as people of delight. Those communities become sacraments, in that they are outward and visible signs of inward grace. That sounds good, but at some point someone asked him if he had ever seen such a community and, if so, what it looked like. His response was that he had. He had been the priest for a community in N.C., which was about the size of St. Luke's, before he went to England and he said that community was characterized by a joyous energy. That kind of energy allowed him, he said, to preach some of his best sermons. It was also a community of hospitality and welcome, always widening the circle; it was multigenerational and, perhaps the most important part, the members

all took care of one another. I was sitting there taking notes and I thought – “You know what? He’s describing St. Luke’s.”

One person described what Christ must have looked like on that mountain –as being like a person who was leaking light. And that’s what we’re called to. Are we perfect? No. Are we becoming children of light? Yes. As we move along that path, we participate more and more in God’s delight, and we are able, more and more, to live fearless and joyful lives – transfigured lives. I’d like to leave you with one more picture of what transfigured living looks like, this from theologian Walter Wink:

Transfiguration is living by a vision: standing foursquare in the midst of a broken, tortured, oppressed, starving, dehumanizing reality, yet seeing the invisible, calling it to come, behaving as if it is on the way, sustained by elements of it that have come already, within and among us. In those moments when people are healed, transformed, freed from addictions, obsessions, destructiveness, or self-worship or when groups or communities or even whole nations glimpse the light of the transcendent in their midst, there the New Creation has come upon us. The world for one brief moment is transfigured.

Wink says that “transfiguration is living by a vision.” And that vision says that something is afoot in the Universe, that someone filled with transcendent brightness, with wisdom and power and goodness is about and among us, that in spite of seemingly over-whelming evidence to the contrary, we can trust the voice that we hear that says, “Do not be afraid. For all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.” Amen.