

Last Sunday after Epiphany

March 3, 2019

Exodus 34:20-35; 2 Cor.3:12-4:2, Luke 9:28-43a

The whole season of Epiphany is about light and what that light enables us to see and about celebrating God's willingness to make himself known to us. And so it's fitting that on this last Sunday of the Epiphany the readings are about the glory of God breaking through and becoming visible to humans. So we have the Exodus reading in which the text tells us not only that Moses saw God but that, as a result of those encounters, 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.

Today is often also called the Feast of the Transfiguration because of the story told in the Gospel.

There are several core concepts in these readings and I'd like to look at each of them. There's glory; there's light; there's veiling and there's transfiguration.

The word for glory is kabod and it means “heavy” or “consequential” or even “heavy with riches.” It also means the presence of God and because “face” also connotes presence, it can mean seeing the face of God. You may remember Moses’ first encounter with God in which he asked God to tell them his name. In that time and culture, to know someone’s name was to have power over them and how great would it then be to know the name of God? And you’ll remember God’s enigmatic answer, translated as I AM WHO I AM, or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. Nothing Moses could get a hold of and use to manipulate this God. But now, after everything that’s happened, the exodus from Egypt, the time in the desert, God’s giving of the commandments, now the conversation is different. Now Moses only wants to see God’s face. He wants a personal encounter, a personal relationship with God. In a verse just before this, the text says that Moses spoke to God face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. I think that’s one of the most hopeful sentences in the entire Bible. Today’s reading says that Moses would veil his shining face when he came from the presence of God, so as to not frighten the Israelites.

You'll remember that the thought was that to see of the face of God would be to die; that a mere mortal could not stand being in the presence of such power. And perhaps one would die, not physically, but would die to all those things that keep us separated from God. Julian of Norwich writes that she had a vision of God and described God like this:

“Completely relaxed and courteous, God was himself the happiness and peace of his dear friends, his beautiful face, radiating measureless love, like a marvelous symphony; and it was that wonderful face shining with the beauty of God that filled that heavenly place with joy and light.” That is someone to run towards and not away from.

And then there's light. If you go back to the very beginning of the Bible, the first thing God says is LET THERE BE LIGHT. And that appears at the beginning of John's Gospel, too, when he describes Christ as being present from the beginning of the creation as life and light. He also speaks of glory: we saw his glory, says John, full of grace and truth.

And then the word transfiguration, which literally means to change appearance, to be given a new

and exalted spiritual appearance. That's what those three disciples witnessed on the mountain: Jesus transfigured or, as one person said, the nature of God so shining through Jesus' physical body that he appeared to be leaking light. The text says that Peter, James and John were silent on the way down from the mountain. I would think so; how could you put words around such an experience?

So, what does this have to do with us? We could say, "Well that's fine for Moses and Jesus, but that doesn't have anything to do with me." And that's where the reading from Paul comes in – it's about us, too. ALL OF US, he says, WITH UNVEILED FACES, SEEING THE GLORY OF THE LORD AS THOUGH REFLECTED IN A MIRROR, ARE BEING TRANSFORMED INTO THE SAME IMAGE FROM ONE DEGREE OF GLORY TO ANOTHER. That same passage is translated in The Message as:

Whenever...we turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there we are, face to face! We suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone...Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the

brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

It doesn't happen all at once. Remember the story about the cucumber – it needs to be immersed in the brine for a while before it becomes a pickle. Same here and I think that's what those references are to veils, and clouds and darkness – it takes a while for the light to break through for us.

When I was in Dallas, at the Church of the Transfiguration, there was a beautiful triptych behind the altar, showing, fittingly enough, the transfiguration. Jesus and Moses and Elijah were what you'd expect. It was the disciples that were interesting. James looks a bit alarmed, but at least he's paying attention; John has his hand shading his eyes against the brightness of the transfigured Christ and Peter looks like nothing out of the ordinary is happening. By contrast, I read about a painting of this same story by a 15th century Italian, Giovanni Bellini. In his painting, one of the disciples is terror-stricken, trying to get away as quickly as possible.

One doubts, though, if he could ever really run away. At the very least, his worldview would be forever changed – certainly he could no longer think of Jesus as just an ordinary teacher or a social reformer. A second disciple is kneeling in rapt adoration. Maybe this is Peter who would like to stay forever up here at this pinnacle of spiritual experience. But we know, from the story and from life, that that's not an option. We all go back down the mountain to the joys and sorrows and crises of everyday life. There are some other figures, too, not disciples. They're off in the distance, going about their work in the fields or chatting along the roadside, completely oblivious. They show that it's possible to miss the extraordinary going on right under our noses. With whom do we identify? The one who misses the whole thing? The one who prays, Our Father, who are in heaven, please just stay there and don't ask me to really encounter you because then I'd have to change?

Because here's the thing. If this light comes into the world, as it has, and we have seen the glory of God, then we are, like Moses, carriers or reflectors of that light, called to embody as best we can the grace and

truth that we have received. We can never see another person as ordinary again, or the gifts of the universe as common place. We're called to live transfigured lives. And what does that look like? Here's something from a Methodist 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 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, ...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.”

One story to illustrate. This appeared in the most recent Christian Century. It was a news story about a group called No More Deaths. The members of the group have been placing food and water in the Sonoran Desert to aid migrants who have crossed

into Arizona. Their goal is simple: to prevent these people from dying in the desert. They made the news because four of them were arrested and convicted because they didn't get an access permit to enter the refuge and they left "food, water and crates in the refuge." The group had previously posted a video of a border patrol agent dumping water left for migrants on the group and feels that the arrests are retaliation. We all know that there are some complicated legal and sociological issues around what's going on at the border. But for me the question is more simple. What would a person who has come face to face with God do if they came upon someone dying of thirst – give them water or dump it out? I think the answer is clear.

Let me close on a lighter note. I recently found a card showing a young girl – the wording simply says; Every once in a while we get a moment when all the world needs us to do is just stand there and sparkle. I plan to send it to my younger NY granddaughter because it reminded me of the time she and I were talking about some social issues and what she thought should be done. She looking at me and

started to sing...this little light of mine, I'm going to
let it shine.... I couldn't have said it better. Amen.