

Last Sunday after Epiphany
Year C
February 14, 2010
Luke 9:28-43

When I start my sermon preparation I usually like to identify illustrations from the world which might illumine the text (or, alternatively, identify examples in life that Scripture might illumine).

This week the text says, "And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." Now, where in all of God's creation was I going to find an example of this type of transformation?

Dazzling white? Here in Bethesda? In the DC metro region? This week? Dazzling white?

All kidding aside, the snow which blankets our region is actually a helpful illustration – at least in one respect. This snow can help us draw an important distinction between what we have experienced here this week and what was experienced on the mountain top in Galilee.

Despite the power outages, the piles of snow on top of our cars, despite falling gutters, caved in roofs, and slushy roads, one can still see the beauty of the snow. It is, in fact, glorious. When it first falls, the snow covers dirty and grimy streets. It levels fields with a smooth layer of glistening white. It transforms our yards and neighborhoods into winter wonderlands.

However, whereas the snow IS spectacular, it is so because it covers up the ordinary and every day with a blanket of dazzling white. In this way it conceals reality.

On the other hand, what happened on that mountaintop - what was witnessed by the band of three sleepy disciples, did not add another layer of mystery to the identity of Jesus Christ. Instead of concealing reality, this instance of transformation - this movement from drab to dazzling - helped further reveal the identity of Jesus Christ.

"This is my son, my chosen; listen to him."

This is not Moses. This is not Elijah.

He is not the law. He is not a prophet.

He is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

He is the Son of God. The beloved. The chosen.

Listen to him.

This message from the cloud is directed at the disciples and is directed at us. We are ordered to listen to the Son of God, whose identity is revealed to us in the extraordinary and in the common; on the mountaintop and on the cross.

We are to see God's Glory reflected in the face of Jesus Christ, shining forth into the world. But we have to remember that the Glory of God is different than any glory we can define in terms of our human capacities to achieve.

As one scholar says, “[The glory of God] is light revealed in darkness, triumph through defeat, greatness expressed in lowliness, freedom expressed in obedience, life through death (Donald J. Luther in Word & World, Volume XXI, Number 1, Winter 2001).”

Most of us know that now, at least intellectually. But we are able to look to that mountaintop in retrospect.

We have come to this understanding after 2000 years of following, listening, learning and praying.

Peter, James and John, however, don't have this same luxury.

When they see the glory of God; they are both amazed and afraid.

Jesus face has changed.
He appears different.
The disciples have barely a minute to process what is happening.

Then a cloud overshadows them.
Dazzling white turns to stormy grey.
The disciples fear the fear of the completely disoriented and the blind.

And then they hear the voice of God and this voice provides for them a lifeline.

Enveloped by the light of God and a stormy cloud, the disciples can't see clearly.
Their eyes are useless.
They must listen into their freedom.

“This is my Son, my chosen, Listen to Him” God says to the disciples.

Though Jesus had begun to tell the disciples what was going to happen to him, it had yet to sink in. Even on the mountaintop Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah about his departure – his exodus – which he is to accomplish in Jerusalem.

But the disciples haven't heard what Jesus has said. They don't understand. Thus they cannot do as Jesus commands.

So God speaks to the disciples from a cloud. And God speak to us.

“This is my Son, my chosen, *hear* Him

Akouo.

This is one of the only words in Greek that I remember from my first semester of seminary. It means to hear, to understand, and to obey.

For me, these three words help define my journey as a follower of Christ. I do not know that the order is prescriptive, but I do believe that all three steps (hearing, understanding, and obeying) are important elements in the journey of a person of faith.

As the disciples demonstrate in this chapter of the Gospel, I believe one often has to hear things over and over again - in order to tune our ear to the nuance of God's self emptying and sacrificial love.

One also has to be patient, humble and discerning. God's will isn't usually communicated through a voice in the clouds. Thankfully for those of us who would imagine that voices from the heavens are about as comfortable as lightning bolts, God often acts through ordinary events and through very ordinary people. Understanding comes over time, often in waves that can refresh us ...or knock us off our feet.

And when we ARE knocked off our feet, getting back up takes courage.

So, in order to follow Christ, one also has to be accepting, trusting and faithful. When we hear the word of God, when it knocks us off our feet, when it pushes us to go where we do not want to go, we take that first step anyway.

After 2000 years of following, listening, learning and praying we know that the result of our obedience is the fulfillment of God's desire for us.

We are to reflect the radiant light of Christ that shines from the face of God, and shines from within our own hearts.

As one author puts it "...to be a human being is to be a glory bearing, glory reflecting, glory bound creature (Thomas W. Currie in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, p 438)."

And we remember, as Karl Barth said, that "[Jesus Christ] is the one who makes us radiant. We ourselves cannot put on bright faces. But neither can we prevent them from shining. Looking up to Him our faces shine."

I look out into this congregation and I see your faces shining.

Unlike the dazzling white snow which blankets our neighborhoods, your dazzling faces do not conceal reality. Your faces reveal your identity.

Sure the story of the Transfiguration is about Jesus Christ. The story helps us understand who Jesus Christ is in relation to those who have gone before, specifically Moses and the prophets. The story reminds us that God has chosen Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

But the story is not only about the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. It is about our transfiguration as well.

We are reminded that every time we walk through these doors, we "risk the possibility of transfiguration." It is in this sanctuary that we gather "around the transfigured and transfiguring one" as Donald Luther so eloquently puts it. "[Here may we find ourselves inspired] to live toward the future of God revealed on the mountaintop (Donald J. Luther in Word & World, Volume XXI, Number 1, Winter 2001)."

As we stumble through the storms of life – both literal and figurative – may we be open to the lifeline given to us by God. May we be open to his voice in our lives.

"This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

And as we enter the season of Lent, may our openness to recognize the Son of God in our lives match the urgent cry of the father mentioned in today's Gospel:

"I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child."

Amen