

Today's readings are not what they seem.

It sounds like they are about veils, changed faces, and building tents. To a certain extent, that's correct. We hear about how Jesus' countenance changes in the presence of Moses and Elijah. We hear about Moses' veiling his changed face after visiting Mt. Sinai. The three apostles want to stay there forever.

Let me suggest that there is something deeper going on than physical metamorphosis. Let me suggest that God is informing us of who we need to be. From the beginning, Scripture teaches that God wants a relationship with humanity. Even when God is upset with God's creation, the yearning for relationship counters any thought of total annihilation. This yearning is so great that God eventually decides to join humanity through a miraculous conception the likes of which we cannot begin to understand, but only to ponder (as Jesus' mother did).

In the stories of Genesis, God speaks directly to humans. God talks to Adam and Eve. God knows when they're hiding.

Later, God talks directly to Abraham and makes many promises. The one time God doesn't speak directly to Abraham is during the whole Isaac/sacrificial lamb debacle. God sends an angel instead. I don't think God was very happy with Abraham, because of the Isaac incident. Once they get home, the direct communication pretty much stops.

Later, God speaks to Joseph indirectly, through his dreams and through the dreams of others. The relationships built by Joseph thanks to these dreams, kept Egypt and other nations alive during a seven-year famine. However, it wasn't until the Hebrews found themselves enslaved in Egypt that God restarted the divine/human dialogue with Moses.

In Luke's gospel, Peter, James, and John didn't just see a bright light and some ancient dudes on a mountaintop. They witnessed Jesus of Nazareth becoming the Christ of faith. They witnessed God's desire for all of creation. Through this witness God gives them and us our purpose. That purpose?

Be in relationship with me. Through me, be in relationship with God.

Jesus didn't do ministry alone. He did it through relationships. At first, it was his cousin John who was his companion. Then, he gathered his own companions. We call them disciples. He called them friends. Three of those friends were pretty darned special because he schlepped them up a mountain with him to witness something spectacular.

That moment on the mountain changed everything. God no longer speaks only to one "righteous" person. Moses isn't coming down from this encounter with more stone tablets. Elijah isn't coming down the mountain to warn kings and queens about abusing their power. No. This time, God IN CHRIST descends with his gob-smacked friends in tow, toward an intimate dinner teaches them that loving each other requires servanthood and vulnerability. He teaches them that God's reign can't be completed alone. God needs us. We need God. We need each other.

Every structure – from the Decalogue to Canon Law – is meant to be a framework for relationships. But, frameworks are often built of fragile materials like egos, misplaced authority, or ill-gotten gains. When those frameworks fail, Institutions

fail. When those materials warp and bend, traditions fold. When they are attacked from within or without, frameworks of empires collapse. History is full of the stories of these events. What remains?

People. People who need loving relationships.

People who are in pain. People who must find a way to begin again. People who feel lost or alone. People who need and seek hope in something that is tangible and not fleeting.

“This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.”

Jesus the Christ transcends laws and institutions. He is beyond traditions. He outlives empires. Jesus, the Christ, in relationship with the Father and the Spirit reveals to us the only purpose Christians have: Love One Another.

There is nothing else. Love one another. Be in relationship with one another.

When you fight, learn to make up. When you hurt, reach out for help. When you can bind another's wounds, do it without expecting anything in return.

Listen to each other. Really listen. Look into another person's eyes. Listen without fashioning a response. Just be there. Be in relationship with your neighbor. Sometimes, YOU are what God needs to start the healing process.

Why relationships? Because, besides our names, they are the only thing we take with us when we die. Even though my dad died 3 years ago, I still have a relationship with him. I remembered this morning that this would have been his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday. I see his influence in my son. I love him and I know he loves me. His love is a part of the framework of who I am today. My relationship with my dad didn't end when he breathed his last.

God's relationship with humanity didn't end when Jesus breathed his last, either.

Too often, we get caught up in our institutions believing that success is tied to its leader or to a program, or the literal meaning we cull from corporate documents. We think that if we just present superior programs or have a charismatic leader or interpret the dogma the right way, we'll find the secret to keep our institutions afloat. We need to rethink that.

You see, the only thing the institutional church has of value is relationships, beginning with our relationship with God. This intangible entity is all we have – but it's all we need.

If we take our relationship with God in Christ seriously and develop it intentionally, we are on the mountaintop with Peter and James and John. We are seeing the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image through the Spirit.

The danger is that we, like those three on the mountain, want to hog it all for ourselves.

We want all that glory and we build tents in order to keep the relationship a secret. We promote programs with promoting the Lord who gives us everything. We require adherence to dogma without adhering to the call of Jesus to love each other. Worse yet, we refuse to commend the faith that is in us. Are we ashamed of having a relationship with Jesus? I hope not.

The lesson we learn from Peter's faux pas is that we are transformed in order to shine the light of Christ into our homes, our communities, our workplaces, our schools. We can't just build pretty tents and put pretty things in them and play pretty music thinking that if we offer it, they will come.

No. We have to offer something they can't get out there. What they can't get outside these doors is the knowledge that God's love is for absolutely everyone – including them – no exceptions.

Now, going to church or being a Christian can't offer a care-free life. What it can offer is a relationship with God in a loving community can keeps us from being afraid or feeling alone.

There are absolutely no cosmetics or investments or dating apps that can do for us what a relationship with the living God can do.

Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany, the season where we remember that Christ brings salvation not only to the Hebrew people but to all the nations. Next week we are in Lent, the season of giving things up and taking things on.

May I suggest that we also make this Lent one in which we invite another person into a relationship with God. How do we do that?

Leave the tent behind. Come down from the mountain. Go into the streets and hallways and grocery store aisles. Sit quietly in a coffee shop with a Bible or a book of prayers in your hands. Be visible. Introduce people you already know to the people with whom you have a relationship through Jesus. Chances are that most of your friends who claim not to be religious still crave community that goes deeper than Sunday brunch.

Don't ask them to come to church with you. Invite them to BE the church with you. Amen.