

Last Sunday after The Epiphany Year C 2016

February 7, 2016

2 Corinthians 3:18 *(The Message Bible)*

All of us! 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.

Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. [On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.]

Go to the Holy Land today and you will be struck by all the churches built on the traditional sites where various events occurred in Jesus' life. Go to the place where some say the Sermon on the Mount took place, and you will find the beautiful Church of the Beatitudes. Go to the traditional spot of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and over that spot is the Church of the Nativity. Churches are built over the traditional places of the Crucifixion, the miracle of changing water into wine, the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and of course, the Transfiguration, of which we hear in our Gospel today. There seems to be an innate desire for us

humans to memorialize pivotal spiritual events by building structures over the spots where they occurred.

In our Gospel today, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, where Jesus is transfigured. We read: “Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and [Moses and Elijah] who stood with him.” Then, just as Moses and Elijah are departing, Peter says to Jesus (and I now read from *The Message* translation), “Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

“This is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials...” There we have it again – that compelling desire to memorialize powerful, direct experiences of God – what some call “mystical experiences,” like the Transfiguration event we read about in our Gospel. We don’t want to *lose* the experience of a Divine encounter; we want to hold onto it, recall it, experience it again, pass it on to the next generation. We would not be here today if it weren’t for the fact that those who first experienced Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection wanted to memorialize their experiences with Jesus by telling about them, interpreting them, ritualizing them, passing them on to others who then wrote about them through their own unique understandings, and forming institutional structures to somehow preserve and transmit these direct, mystical experiences of God. That’s the reason we have a New Testament, Creeds, Holy Communion, and the institutional Church today.

“How does one get from mystic experience to an established religion?” asks Brother David Steindl-Rast. “My one-word answer is: inevitably. What makes the process inevitable is that we do with our mystical experience what we do with every experience, that is, we try to understand it; we opt for or against it; we express our *feelings* with regard to it. Do this with your mystical experience and you have all the makings of a religion.”¹

But when the memorialization of a divine event becomes **too** formulized or fixed, or we come to **expect** a particular *emotional* response every time we read Scripture or take communion, or doing the ritual the right way becomes more important than conveying the Living God *through* that ritual, then those memorializations *can* become **roadblocks**, rather than pathways, to God.

Now, I firmly believe that there **are** such things as holy places and holy buildings; and I believe that liturgy and ritual and reading and studying the Bible can powerfully communicate God to us! I would not be an Episcopalian (and certainly not a priest) if I *didn’t* believe these things. But I also know what it is for us to **worship** buildings, Bibles, music, liturgies, emotions, and the *trappings* of religion in **place** of the Living God.

“Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials...” Notice that Peter does *not* say, “Master, this is a great moment! My heart is transformed! My

life is transfigured!” What Peter fails to realize, as *many* of us often do, is that what is important is not so much that *Jesus* is transfigured, but that **we** be transfigured – just as the whole point of Lent is not that we memorialize **Jesus’** death and resurrection, but that *we* die with Christ and are raised to new life in Christ, and carry that transformed life into our daily lives.

One of the most helpful teachings I have learned from Richard Rohr in recent years – and this goes against a ritual act that I had been taught and practiced for over 30 years – is that it makes no sense for me to bow to the altar *after* I have received communion, since the very meaning of receiving Holy Communion is that Christ is now *in me!* I don’t leave Christ at the altar, turning and bowing to him as I walk away; I have taken Christ into me, and I take Christ with me back to my pew and back into the world, into the week ahead. If I should bow to anything, it should be to the Christ I have just received in the Eucharist.

Which is why I chose **not** to cut off our Gospel reading today after the mystical experience on the mountain; for I am convinced that Luke **intends** the connection between the mountaintop mystical experience of the Transfiguration and the disciples’ task of putting that divine experience into *action* after they **descend** from the mountain.

Professor David Lose makes the case that Luke, in writing **his** account of the Transfiguration, understands what happens on the mountain as a metaphor for what we Christians experience in Sunday worship. Whereas Mark and Matthew have the Transfiguration occurring “after **6** days,” Luke changes *his* account to say that it occurred on the **8th** day. “[T]he eighth day came very quickly in Christian tradition to refer to Sunday,” Dr. Lose writes, “the day of resurrection and worship, the first day of a new week and era. Jesus discusses with Moses and Elijah his impending [“exodus” – his death and resurrection]. And the voice from heaven instructs the disciples to ‘Listen to [Jesus].’ ...[T]his combination of prayer, discussion focused on [Jesus’ death and resurrection,] and the command to listen – all taking place on the eighth day”² – show that the elements of the Transfiguration are the very format of our Sunday worship (minus the meal).

But Peter, James, and John seem **not** to carry the meaning and power of that mountaintop experience back into their everyday lives. The first thing Luke records after they descend from the mountain is in incident where the disciples are incapable of casting out a demon from a child who is tormented with seizures. Now, back at the very beginning of this same chapter in Luke’s Gospel (9:1-6), Jesus had given his disciples power and authority over demons and diseases, and they had used that power with effectiveness. Now, just one day after having witnessed the mystical appearance of Jesus transfigured, these disciples are *incapable* of healing this child. The disconnect between the religious experience and their everyday lives could not be more stark! Witnessing the divine Transfiguration of Jesus seems **not** to have transfigured Peter, James, and John at all. So disappointed is Jesus in their inability to carry the powerful religious

experience back into their lives that he uses some very strong language (quite unusual for Luke) to express his disappointment and frustration with his disciples. “You faithless and perverse generation,” Jesus says, “how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?”

Now, if, as Dr. Lose persuasively argues, Luke intends his readers to liken the mountaintop religious experience of our Gospel story with the Sunday worship experience of the Christian community, then the message is clear to us all: We, too, are called to take our Sunday worship experience back into our daily lives in the coming week. “Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord,” we say. Our love and service in our daily lives are empowered by what happens each Sunday as we are fed, renewed, and inspired in worship. As the sign over the door reads as you leave this place, “You are now entering the mission field.” And I believe we are getting a clearer picture of at least part of what that mission field looks like as we explore possible ministries with Laundry Love and providing transportation in our community.

Peter responds to the mystical experience on the mountain by saying, “Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials,” and Luke quickly adds that Peter didn’t know what he was talking about. For **Luke** knows that ultimately the only memorial that matters is not one constructed by human hands over the spot of a spiritual event in history, or even a written record of that event in Scripture. What ultimately matters, rather, is the *living* memorial of a life transfigured in God. As St. Paul writes in today’s Epistle (and again I read from *The Message Bible*): “... 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.”

AMEN

¹ David Steindl-Rast “The Mystical Core of Organized Religion,” Copyright 1989 by David Steindl-Rast. Used by the Council on Spiritual Practices with permission. First appeared in *ReVision*, Summer 1989 12(1):11-14.

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/transfiguration-c-worship-transfigured/>