

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany (23 February 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2020-02-22 Sat 21:07>

O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 24:12-18, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew [16.13-] 17:1-9, Psalm 2

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

This weekend is Transfiguration Sunday, the conclusion and shining climax of the season of Epiphany. Epiphany was a season of light, concerned with the revelation of who Jesus is, this appearance of God wrapped in flesh as a little baby. The Transfiguration is when that light and revelation get as plain as they can be.

In 2016 I went on Pilgrimage to the Holy Land in a group led by my Bishop. It was an amazing journey. On our first day there we went to Mt. Tabor, the traditional site of the Transfiguration of Jesus. The road up the mountain was so windy we had to get out of our tour bus and get into little vans to make our way up. But finally we got to the top and there, besides a crusader castle, was a Basilica marking the traditional site of the Transfiguration. Inside the basilica are three chapels: one on either side for Moses and Elijah, and the central one for Jesus. We celebrated Holy Eucharist in the Moses chapel.

I find it delightfully ironic that preachers give Peter a hard time about his foolish offer to build three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, when that's exactly what the Christian church did just a few hundred years later! Peter was prophetic in his offer, and Christians were not very good listeners to God's response to Peter!

2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

Our Gospel text today, as always, is part of a larger story. Jesus has just asked his disciples who people say he is. People say Jesus is a prophet. Simon says Jesus is the Christ. Jesus calls Simon by a new name, Peter, and says that upon this rock he will build his church.

Then Jesus tells his disciples that being the Christ means being betrayed and crucified, so that he can rise again in resurrection. Peter tells Jesus not to talk that way, and Jesus rebukes Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!”

And, a week later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up onto the mountain where he is transfigured before them. Jesus’ whole body shines with a brilliant light and his disciples see him engaged in a conversation with two others: Moses, the giver of the Torah, and Elijah, the most famous of the prophets.

The topic of conversation among Jesus’ disciples was about who Jesus is, what his significance might be, and God makes it very plain for them. Moses is still referred to by pious Jews as *Moshe rabeinu*, Moses our teacher. To him were attributed the first five books of the Bible, the very center of the Jewish scriptures and the foundation of the story of God’s people. The Bible tells us that when he would talk to God, his face would shine. And here, Jesus’ whole body shines and even his clothes!

Elijah was the most famous of the prophets, one so beloved of God that he never even died, but was simply carried up to God in a chariot of fire. Later prophets spoke of a great day when Elijah would return to finish his work. Jesus’ disciples saw Jesus rise up into the heavens without benefit of a chariot, and have been talking ever since about Jesus’ return.

Here, for the disciples, God places Jesus in the lineage of these two great lights, Jesus being the fulfillment of the Torah and the prophets, the climax of the great drama of salvation, the event pre-figured by Moses and Elijah and every other messenger from God who had ever come before.

Here in the presence of Peter, who had admonished Jesus for negative self-talk and anticipation of betrayal and crucifixion, God indicated Jesus and said, “*Listen to him.*”

Here in the presence of Moses and Elijah, two of the most revered figures in Jewish history, God indicated Jesus and said, “*This is my Son, my Beloved. Listen to him.*”

Immediately following Jesus’ instruction to his disciples that if they wanted to follow him, they must give up everything, even their very lives, and carry crosses, God shows the disciples an encouraging sight and says of Jesus, “*Listen to him.*”

3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

It is precisely as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and death, and as he begins to prepare his disciples for the hard times ahead, that the Transfiguration occurs. There is a deep connection, an overlap, between Jesus’ death and the glory of God’s Kingdom. Glory and pain are interconnected, somehow. The throne of Jesus was a cross, his crown had thorns, and his enduring image in the last book of the Bible is as a lamb that was slain and yet lives and reigns.

It is precisely as the disciples prepare to endure the pain and persecutions which will come to them as followers of Jesus, terrified and mourning his death, then being subject to similar persecutions themselves, that God reveals to them a glimpse of the larger reality in which they, too, live. For them, as well, the cross, the thorns, the darkness are the way to light and life and victory.

Today, pain and difficulty and darkness remain a part of our lives, as well as shining moments of transcendence and goodness. Amidst daily challenges to our faith, God continues to reveal God's goodness to us and encourage us on our journeys.

Moses and Elijah both knew great pain and anguish. Now they dwell in glory. Jesus walked down that same road, inviting us to follow. The disciples pursued that path, and left trail notes so that we might do the same. Those trail notes are what we call the Bible.

Epiphany, the revelation of Jesus, is a gift meant to give us strength for the journey. These next 40 days of Lent are intended to be a time of self-examination, a remembering that life is not all light, but also darkness, a wrestling with the darkness that faces us from all sides, and especially the darkness we find within ourselves. The darkness is not pleasant, but in the end, even darkness is not dark to God. Like Moses, like Elijah, like the disciples, like Jesus, the darkness is simply a part of the journey into the Eternal light of God's presence. Today we mourn; tomorrow we will rejoice. Today we struggle, tomorrow we will be comforted. Today we feel our way forward as though blind, tomorrow we will see clearly, and what we see will be cause for joy.

On a mountaintop in the Holy Land 2000 years ago, the Son of God was transfigured before the eyes of his disciples. In your baptism, that work of transfiguration was begun in you, and its fulfilment is as sure as God's promise. In God, darkness is always just a preparation for the coming of the light.

Amen.