

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Epiphany Last (27 Feb 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

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 34:29-35, 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2, Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a], Psalm 99

1 I. Be transformed – or not

While [Jesus] 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.¹

As we begin I want to reach back to our second reading to address a possible misunderstanding. The Christian Scriptures have existed for a couple millenia now, and they were written so long ago, so far away, that sometimes we misread them. In particular, there has developed a habit among western Christians of reading our scriptures as being anti-Jewish. So with our second reading today, from Paul, you and I might read that and hear an anti-Jewish polemic. The problem with this interpretation is that Paul *is* a Jewish person, having an argument within his own community. This is not an argument about Jews per se. Paul is arguing for the freedom that is in store for *every* believer who will receive the Christ and be ruled by him. Paul is talking about a kind of transfiguration that happens, which can happen to *us*, if only we will refrain from hardening our hearts and covering our minds with a veil. Paul knew what it was to be transformed, to be radically changed in his belief and opinion based on an encounter with Jesus: and Paul is wishing that same transformation or *transfiguration* on his hearers as well.

2 II. Transfigurations

All our scriptures today tell stories of Transfiguration. *Moses* was changed by his encounter with God on the mountain-top; the people were terrified when they saw how he was changed, so Moses would hide his face while it was still glowing from the encounter. *Elijah*, too, had been to the mountain-top where he had experienced the presence of God in sheer silence. Now *Jesus* was on the mountain, transfigured and experiencing the presence of these two other icons of transformation. Moses was the central character of the Old Testament, the giver of Torah. God had promised another like Moses who was to come. Elijah was the quintessential prophet. God had promised another like him would arise. Jesus stand in a direct line with these two, with Torah, with prophecy, all brought to their destiny in the Gospel of reconciliation that was accomplished in the body of Jesus on the cross.

¹Lk 9.29-31 NRSV.

And, fortunately, for us today, Jesus wasn't alone! There were three disciples on the mountain with him. They were sleepy and thought they must be dreaming. They couldn't believe their eyes. But we have their testimony, handed down to us for nearly 2000 years. So in hindsight, the disciples believed what they had seen, understood what a gift it was, and shared their story with us who would follow in their footsteps.

3 III. Today

Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany: the last Sunday before Lent. The last Sunday when we will shout "Hallelujah." Lent begins on Wednesday, and indeed Ash Wednesday is one of the two days set aside by the Episcopal Church as days of fasting. Lent is a time when we pray a little more, we confess a little more thoughtfully, and we open ourselves a little more widely to God's activity in our lives.

When we do that, when we open ourselves to *perceive* and to *notice* God's transformative activity in our lives, the ways God changes us. Those good experiences, the consolations we find in Christ, are like deposits into a bank account, good things we can store up and save against bad. Memories to carry us through a rainy day. Because hard times also come in life, there's no doubt.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus was about to undergo the passion: one of the hardest things imaginable. Soon he would be captured by a mob late at night, carried off to an unjust, midnight trial, and then presented to the authorities for crucifixion. Hard times were coming for Jesus and for his terrified disciples. But our Gospel writer tells us that as Moses and Elijah met with Jesus, they were "speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."² They were encouraging Jesus, and the disciples, giving them clear, bright memories they could hang onto in hard times.

4 IV. Church, Lent

It didn't take long after this before Jesus was betrayed, tried, condemned, and crucified. All the faith salted away was being tested. The disciples were having to bring out all their memories, all their hopes and dreams and expectations, and were trying to evaluate them carefully. What was real? What was going on? Where was God in this, even as God in the flesh hung upon the cross?

And those memories, those good experiences, those prior encounters with the faithfulness of God, gave the disciples the endurance they needed, just barely enough, to get through the bitterness of Jesus' death and his rest in the tomb. They emerged on the other side doubtful, discouraged, depressed, even, but still with hearts open enough that, when it was time, they were able to receive the new thing that was Resurrection. For Peter, James, and John, as well as Jesus, Elijah and Moses had prepared them for Jesus' departure which he had then accomplished at Jerusalem.

As we begin Lent together, I wonder: what hard things are you experiencing right now? What is the passion you're facing down and wishing you didn't have to deal with? How has God prepared you, fortified you, against this challenge?

²Lk 9.31 NRSV.

The Church, the Christian tradition, offers us lots of opportunities and possibilities in this department. You might say that's the whole point of the church: to teach us to pray. Whether in our Contemplative Practices Retreat yesterday or in the Daily Office found at the beginning of the Book of Common Prayer and offered as a recording on the St. Thomas' website six days per week: there are all kinds of ways Jesus offers you an invitation to draw close to him, to find comfort in God.

I want to challenge you this Lent to consider adding a temporary new practice. I challenge you to find an additional 20 minutes per day for prayer, with Centering Prayer or the Daily Office or a more popular podcast like the beautiful "Pray as you go." You can pray in the morning by getting up a few minutes earlier. You can pray over lunch. You can pray in the evening before turning on the TV.

The challenge is to follow the disciples, to stay awake and to open ourselves to God doing something new in our lives. You may not recognize it at the time. You almost surely won't recognize it when something hard or terrible happens in your life. But when the practices you have engaged give you a firm vehicle with which to navigate the hard times, it is afterward, in hindsight, that you might notice God has done some amazing new thing in you. You may even find, I'm sure that someday you will find, that you, in fact, have been transfigured!

Amen.