

“Mountain Wonder, Earthly Service”
delivered Sunday, February 14, 2010
by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC
Luke 9:28-43
Transfiguration

So far in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has been patiently teaching his disciples, explaining to them the nature of God. They have seen demonstrations of his miraculous power; they have seen him confront his adversaries about what it means to live the faith according to the law of God; they have heard some of his stories about the kingdom of God, like the one about good seed falling on good soil and bearing the fruit of the gospel. Just before our reading for today, Jesus has asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” and Peter boldly proclaimed, “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” And yet, as soon as the words spill off the lips of Peter, Jesus realizes that they still don’t understand, so he tells them quite plainly that following him will mean going through his suffering and death, and to be his disciple means living a life of sacrifice and service. So today, after heavy words about losing one’s life in order to save it, and about taking up one’s cross daily to follow Jesus, we have this most amazing story of revelation.

It has been eight days since Jesus announced that he must suffer and die – a totally confusing and unsettling reality for the disciples. And so, as a way of sorting it all out, Jesus has invited three of his disciples to go with him to the mountaintop – up away from the crowds and distractions to spend some time in prayer. The mountaintop has long been a place where God is found, and sure enough God shows up there. In one of the most dramatic moments in all of scripture, everything changes. Jesus takes on a dazzling brightness and a shining face, and in that brightness there suddenly appear the two principal figures of the Old Testament, Moses who represents the glory of the Law, and Elijah, the glory of the prophets. All the presence of God that was with them in their day is now seen shining in the face of Jesus. Jesus is changed as into a being of light. It was as if his skin had become transparent for a moment, and what had been inside him all along shone through for others to see. (1)

No wonder Peter wants to build three booths and stay there on that mountain top. It is as if he finally got it – in that one bright shining moment he understood – that his friend Jesus was the central character in God’s plan for the world and for the human family. Who wouldn’t want to stay up there and bask in the glow of God revealed in the clarity of bright light? But that is not what is meant to be.

The gospel tells us the very next day they are at the foot of the mountain, back in the chaos of the needy crowds, healing a boy, and doing the work of God. The story started out with an eight day gap between the sayings of Jesus and the mountain top experience, but it ends with barely a day gone by to get Jesus and those disciples back on the road again among the people where the cries of human need are pressing upon them once again. As Jim Wallis has says, “In Jesus, God hits the streets.” (2)

There is a sense in which the Transfiguration is a kind of parable of what happens when we worship. We gather here in church hoping for some moment of revelation or an experience of transcendence. Sometimes it comes in the hearing of scripture, or the preaching of it; sometimes it comes when the Assurance of Pardon is spoken and the feeling of having been forgiven washes over us; oftentimes – for me – it comes in the music – the raising of our voices together in a hymn, or being transported by some other musical offering, with or without words. When

worship is at its best, I think we have that moment that Peter had and realize, “Lord, it is good to be here.” But as with that moment of Transfiguration, worship never lasts forever. We have to take whatever shining, mysterious, wonderful sense of oneness with God we have experienced, and go down the mountain, go down from the sanctuary and get back to real life. (3) If worship has done what it is supposed to do – real life is also somehow changed. Jesus led his disciples down the mountain to a crowd, a frantic father, a desperately sick boy lying in the dirt, convulsing. Everything there changed too.

John Buchanan, Pastor and Editor of *The Christian Century*, has said of this story: “There is something here that gets at the very heart of Christianity: the mysterious holiness of the mountain and the blunt reality of human life and human need and human suffering.” Jesus and the disciples walking down from the mountain into the valley of human need is a metaphor for the church. Worship brings us into the awesome presence of God, and reminds us that we live our lives in the presence of God; we point to the sacred, the holy, the Godly, in everyday life. And then, with the Benediction we are sent in the name of God, into the crowd, the city, the valley of human need, where little children are sick and frantic parents cry out for help. Both – And. Both worship and service: both glorious hymns that remind us of mystery and holiness and serving supper among the homeless, healing the sick, visiting the lonely, caring for the poor.” (4) There is truth up there in the mystical silence on the mountain where Jesus’ face shone bright as a thousand suns, and there is truth coming down the mountain into the valley of the mission of the church. True worship ushers people out of church into the world where we ourselves enact the love, peace and justice of God.

Sara Miles is a member of an Episcopal church in San Francisco. She is a writer by profession and says that it was her journalistic curiosity that led her to wander into worship one Sunday morning for the first time in her life. She had a sort of mountain top moment of revelation about who God is that compelled her to lead her church in reaching out to the poor of San Francisco. She writes: “Until recently, I thought being a Christian was all about belief. But then, in an experience I still can’t logically explain, I walked into a church and a stranger handed me a chunk of bread. Suddenly, I knew that it was made out of real flour and water and yeast – yet I also knew that God, named Jesus, was alive...and in my mouth. That first communion knocked me upside-down. Faith turned out not to be abstract at all, but material and physical. I’d thought Christianity meant angels and trinities and being good. Instead, I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored. I came to believe that God is revealed not only in bread and wine during church services, but whenever we share food with others – particularly strangers. So, over the objections of some of my fellow parishioners, I started a food pantry right in the church sanctuary, giving away literally tons of oranges and potatoes and Cheerios around the very same altar where I’d eaten the body of Christ. At the pantry, serving over 500 strangers a week, I confronted the same issues that had kept me from religion in the first place. Like church, the food pantry asked me to leave certainty behind, tangled me up with people I didn’t particularly want to know, and scared me with its demand for more faith than I was ready to give.” (5)

And then she says this: “My new vocation didn’t turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays and declaring myself “saved.” Rather, “Christian words and acts were beginning to cohere, scripture and tradition to resonate with what I was actually doing.” (6)

You know, I used to think that the Transfiguration was just like the Baptism of Jesus as it is recorded in the Gospels, a sort of Divine Revelation, Part 2. In similar fashion, it recalls other

Old Testament appearances of the Divine – hidden in the clouds, the voice of God booming forth announcing this Jesus is the Chosen one of God and we should listen to him. But there is a significant difference in these two epiphanies. The Baptism of Jesus inaugurates his own ministry and the Transfiguration inaugurates ours. After his baptism Jesus departs into the wilderness to be alone for forty days, into his season of discernment and prayer to figure out what it means to be the Beloved Son of God. The Transfiguration, on the other hand, leads us all down the foot of the mountain into the crowds where people are hungering for an encounter with God. By this time in the gospel, Jesus has already announced his impending suffering and death, and from now on he will show us how to do his work – to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to reach out in care and compassion to a hurting world in his name.

The glory of God's presence cannot be separated from real life in the world, any more than the mountain top is separate from the valley below. Nor can the worship of God on Sunday morning stop at the door as we leave the sanctuary, for the truth of the matter is that's where the life of faith really begins. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Susan Andrews, "Facing God," *Lectionary Homiletics*, February, 2001, p. 30.
- 2) John Buchanan, Wallis quote, "Speechless," *Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago*, 2/18/07, p. 4.
- 3) Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Jan. –Mar., 2010, p. 31.
- 4) Buchanan again.
- 5) Sara Miles, "Strangers Bring Us Closer to God," *This I Believe on NPR*, 5/5/08.
- 6) Sara Miles, from her memoir, *Take This Bread*, p. 169.