

Sunday, February 23, 2020

Last Sunday after Epiphany (Year A)

Exodus 24.12-18; 2 Peter 1.16-21; Matthew 17.1-9

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Invitation to Transfiguration”

Last year during Lent, I did a presentation on my Holy Land pilgrimage, entitled “The Fifth Gospel.” I chose that name based on a comment that our tour guide made—echoing the sentiment of many Biblical scholars—that the land is the fifth gospel. That in order to truly understand the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—you need to know something of the land in which those stories took place. That the land provides additional insight into the Gospels, and to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

In the year since my return from Israel, I have certainly found this to be true. Having been to the locations of many Biblical events, I find that even as I read old familiar stories from the Bible, I see them in a new way. I see the places where those stories unfolded. And those stories take on new meaning, new significance. Some more so than others. The story of the Transfiguration is one of those stories that takes on a new and deeper meaning for me by virtue of the geography.

In Galilee, a solitary “mountain,” Mount Tabor, rises above a landscape of plains, rolling hills, and valleys. This is the site commonly referred to as the Mount of the Transfiguration. At only 1,886 feet high, Mount Tabor is not much more than a hill by our standards. But in the local geography, Mount Tabor is a striking feature. Truth be told, no one knows whether Mount Tabor is actually the site of the Transfiguration. None of the Gospel accounts identify the “high mountain” by name. In fact, the earliest identification of Mount Tabor as the Mount of the Transfiguration is by the early Christian scholar and theologian Origen in the third century.

Despite its less than atmospheric height, standing on Mount Tabor and looking at the plains and villages below, you do have a feeling of being high above everything—more than its 1,886 feet would seem to afford—almost as if seeing the world from God’s vantage point. It’s easy to see why Jesus, why God, picked this particular place for the Transfiguration. A place where heaven and earth seem to meet. This was a pivotal moment in Jesus’ life and ministry, when “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Mt 17.2)—when Jesus is transfigured with divine splendor, revealing his true nature as Son of God. The moment when he came face to face with two of the greatest figures in Jewish history: Moses and Elijah. Figures that respectively represent and embody the Law and the Prophets. The moment when Jesus was revealed to his closest disciples as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. The moment when God, in no uncertain terms, verifies that Jesus is indeed his Son, with authority to speak on behalf of God: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Mt 17.5). In all of this—the Transfiguration, the meeting with Moses and Elijah, and God’s affirmation of Jesus’ identity—we have the single greatest revelation of who Jesus was. At least, prior to the Resurrection, anyway. It was this moment when Jesus’ journey took a sharp turn. One that would lead him to Jerusalem, to his Passion, to his death, and to his

Resurrection, where everything would change. Where the world would be transfigured into what God has always envisioned it to be.

As we prepare for Lent, as we prepare for Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and for his final week—what we now know as Holy Week—we recognize that the events on the Mount of the Transfiguration foreshadow what is to come. Namely, Jesus' ultimate transfiguration—his Resurrection. But we also see in the events on that mountain something else. We see another transfiguration. That of the three disciples who were present: Peter, James, and John. And we see an inkling of, an invitation to, our own transfiguration.

I say “inkling” because, admittedly, the events on the Mount of the Transfiguration were confusing even for those present. Peter, James, and John would not—could not—have fully comprehended or appreciated what they had witnessed until after Christ's Resurrection. Hence, Jesus' injunction to them as they were coming down the mountain to “tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead” (Mt 17.9). Only in light of the Resurrection would any of this even begin to make sense.

Now, there was a clue that what had happened on the Mount of the Transfiguration was something significant, something life changing. It is highly likely that Peter, James, and John would have been reminded of another mountaintop experience from their own Jewish history: the scene on Mount Sinai where God gave the Law and Commandments to Moses—part of which we heard in today's Old Testament reading. The giving of the Law that would forever change the Israelites and their relationship with God. The giving of the Law that would shape and inform the Israelites as God's Chosen People. An event that would transfigure them and all who followed in God's ways. Just as the events on Mount Tabor transfigure those of us who follow Christ.

All of this coming together in the minds of the disciples and in the minds of those who witness these events two millennia later. So it is that Mount Tabor—the Mount of the Transfiguration—with its almost otherworldly view of the earth spread out below, just as God might see it, was where God shared his objectives with humanity. With us. That Jesus is the Messiah. That he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets—the fulfillment of Scripture. And God shared a preview of how this will be manifest through Christ's Resurrection. THE single most spectacular event in all of history. An event that would forever change humanity and its relationship with God. The Mount of the Transfiguration serving as an icon of that transfigured relationship. Serving as our invitation to participate in that transfigured relationship.

In our Epistle reading from the Second Letter of Peter, Peter himself reflects on the events of the Transfiguration and what it means for those of us who live post-Transfiguration, post-Resurrection. At the beginning of this letter (prior to the part we heard this morning), Peter clearly states the purpose for sharing with his audience the experience of his time as one of Jesus' disciples, and particularly his experience of Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may

escape from the corruption that is in the world . . . and may become participants in the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you. (2 Pet 1.3-7, 10.11).

After attesting to his being one of the “eyewitnesses to [Christ’s] majesty”—to the Transfiguration—Peter then interprets the meaning of that event in a way that applies not only to those who witnessed it, but to all who choose to follow Christ. He writes: “You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet 1.19b).

After years of reflection, Peter has a different response to the one he had on the Mount of the Transfiguration. Where, so overwhelmed and awestruck by what he was witnessing that he wants to hold on to the moment and make it last forever, he offers, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Mt 17.4). In hindsight, and in the light of the Resurrection where the Transfiguration takes on greater clarity, Peter is able to reflect that the Transfiguration was not a private moment to bask in. It was not something to be held on to. That ultimately, he, and the other disciples, needed to go down the mountain to resume their day-to-day lives. And that Jesus needed to go down the mountain and set his face toward Jerusalem and his destiny.

All those years after the Transfiguration, Peter was able to look back on his life and his ministry and see that that transfiguration was not a one-and-done event. Because he did go down the mountain and faced a turbulent life of ministry. And there were times he stumbled. Even though witnessing the truth of who Jesus was, he still denied him three times on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion. After Jesus’ Resurrection, he hid out of fear of the Roman authorities. As the new Church was forming, he stumbled at times, getting hung up on Jewish law, not quite getting what this whole new movement was about. Not quite getting that God intended this to be for all people, not just Jews.

But later in his life, as he reflected on the Transfiguration, as he reflected on his own life and ministry, he was able to see that transfiguration is not something that happens once but is an ongoing process. That what happened on that mountain was an invitation to continually be transfigured. That true transfiguration does not happen on the mountain, but in the midst of everyday life as we continually strive to live according to Christ’s commandments.

Peter’s reflection on the transfigured life serves as an invitation to us. “You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place.” We have been to the Mount of the Transfiguration and seen the truth of who Christ is. We have heard Christ’s command to come down the mountain. And we hear his invitation to continually be transfigured by our experience of his presence in our lives, so that his light shines through us.