

## Epiphany Last C 2019 Sermon

### *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.]*

### **Exodus 34:29-35**

### **2 Corinthians 3:12-18**

*Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*

On the mountaintop, as he is praying [again!], Jesus is transfigured, and he talks with Moses and Elijah about his “departure”. And Peter says to Jesus, ““Master... Let us make three dwellings, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.””

What is going on here? What's with Moses and Elijah? and what is this "departure" they talk about? and what's with the 3 dwellings Peter wants to build? As often happens with the Bible, what would have seemed obvious to a Jew in the Middle East 2000 years ago may *not* seem quite as obvious to you and me in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century America.

What would have been obvious to Jews in Jesus' day is that Moses symbolizes The Law, the first 5 books of the Bible; and Elijah symbolizes the Books of the Prophets – and together, the Law and the Prophets comprise most of the Hebrew Bible. Moses and Elijah together, therefore, represent the whole of the Jewish religious tradition. And what is not clear in our English translation is that the word "departure" in today's text is, in the original Greek, the word "exodus" – which harkens back to that time when the people of Israel, led by Moses, escaped from slavery in Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, living in tents. In fact, "tent" (or "booth") is the actual word which our lesson translates "dwelling." Peter wants to build 3 tents, or booths, because the ancient Festival of Booths in the Jewish religion was, and still is, an 8-day festival which the Jews of Jesus' time, and Jews still today, celebrate by building little tents, or "booths," commemorating the Exodus and the 40 years in the wilderness..

And so, the fact that Peter doesn't grasp the full meaning of what he is seeing doesn't mean that building 3 booths is nonsensical: it *does* make sense, given his Jewish background. Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are speaking *about* exodus, the presence of Moses *recalls* the Exodus, and the Feast of Booths *celebrates* the Exodus. What Peter is doing is taking the mystical, divine experience he is witnessing and putting it into a framework, a context which is familiar to him. Peter wants to ritualize the experience, in order that it not be lost.

And we do the same. Brother David Steindl-Rast<sup>1</sup> explains that whenever we have a powerful experience of God, we want to remember it and re-experience it, and so we establish rituals to do so. Perhaps you are sitting on a bench in a park one day and you hear a bird sing and you suddenly get this powerful tingling sensation and a deep sense of peace, and you feel at one with all of creation. The moment lasts for some time, and after you return home, you still remember the thrill and the feeling of oneness and peace which washed over you that early morning you sat on that bench in the park and heard that thrush sing. You may go back to that bench time and again in the hopes of reliving that moment when the call of the thrush swept you off your feet and you felt at one with God. A ritual has been established, a kind of pilgrimage to a personal holy place. And although that thrush never returns and you never hear that song again, nonetheless, returning to that spot brings up from the depths of your soul some echo of that divine experience, and you are reconnected to God.

The Jews do the same with the Feast of Passover, participating in an ancient ritual which not only *remembers* the experience of escaping from slavery into freedom; the ritual intends that the participants actually **experience** that freedom in the here and now. *We* do the same in our Eucharist, which Jesus *told* us to do "in remembrance of" him. Each time we celebrate Eucharist, time and space are suspended, and Jesus is present with us again in a powerful way.

At least, that is the intended *purpose* of the sacrament: to bring Christ into our present lives, so that we can be "transformed into the same image," as St. Paul writes in today's Epistle.

Recently, I had a conversation with some friends who had been raised in a very traditional Roman Catholic Church. One of them was asking me about our Episcopal Lenten traditions: Do we fast during Lent? Do we abstain from meat on Fridays? I told these friends that we in the Episcopal Church encourage people to choose a Lenten practice that will help them grow closer to God. One of my friends responded, “We fasted on Fridays because we were told that if we didn’t, we would go to hell.”

And that struck me: Here was an example of a ritual, a tradition – fasting – that was originally meant to remind people of their dependence on God and to draw them closer to God; and yet, at least for these friends, the ritual had *lost* that transformative purpose. It had become, instead, something that was done out of obligation and fear. The ritual had become disconnected from its original, transformative purpose of drawing people closer into union with God.

On the mountaintop, Peter witnesses what might be described as a “pulling back of the veil” between this world and the next, seeing Jesus, Moses, and Elijah radiant – as they truly are in the kingdom of God. But rather than allowing this glorious revelation and divine experience to soak into him and transfigure *him*, also, Peter interprets the experience through a pre-existing Jewish-religious lens, putting it into a familiar box labeled “Feast of Booths.” And by filtering that experience through this conventional lens, the powerful newness and divine wonder and mystery of the experience was rendered almost commonplace, stripped of its divine power to transform.

I think this is why, after coming down from the mountain, the disciples are not able to heal the man’s son, and why Jesus is so exasperated because of it. The divine experience of the Transfiguration on the mountaintop hadn’t transfigured the 3 disciples at all.

Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, some Pharisees and scribes had asked Jesus why his disciples didn’t fast like the disciples of the Pharisees did. And Jesus responded, “[No] one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, ‘The old is good.’”<sup>2</sup>

In wanting to build 3 booths, Peter was trying to put new wine into old wineskins – to put this new, overpowering, divine experience of the Transfiguration into a familiar container – the ritual of the Feast of Booths. And besides, this is new wine, and Peter, like all of us, prefers the old wine. Episcopal monk Curtis Almquist writes: “I think there’s an innate craving to be ‘a conservative.’... This innate craving to conserve is about claiming and clinging to the treasury of... the past... It’s about clinging to a certain prism through which to see life, and that’s the way it’s *got* to be...”<sup>3</sup> But Brother Almquist warns that our prism can become a prison; and I think that this is what Peter is struggling with – what we all struggle with. We love the old wine and the old wineskins; and we steadfastly look through the same prism we have always looked through.

The story of the Transfiguration is always read on the last Sunday after Epiphany. One reason for this is that it is the epitome of epiphanies! But another reason, I believe, is that it teaches us, this Sunday before Ash Wednesday, about entering into the holy season of Lent, and allowing it to transform us.

My friends, I firmly believe that Lent is a holy time! There is something about this season that gives us power to strip away ego and examine our lives honestly and open ourselves to the transformative Spirit of God. Lent is a gift to be used for our own transfiguration. There are many time-honored tools you can use that will help open you to transfiguration: prayer, self-examination, fasting or abstinence, silence, journaling, giving alms, serving the poor, reading daily devotionals or the Bible or other spiritual books, receiving ashes as a reminder of our mortality, attending our Friday evening offerings, or any other intentional practice that will open you to the transforming spirit of God. But today's Gospel warns us not to make a familiar tradition an end in itself rather than a tool for opening us to God.

Both our Old Testament and Epistle today tell of how, after Moses had visited with God on the mountain, his face radiated the light of God; and the people were afraid to see this light. Why were they afraid? Perhaps because it was unfamiliar and powerful; or perhaps it was because they knew that, if they allowed themselves to be *exposed* to that light, it would be like new wine, which might break their old wineskins. They were afraid that they, too, might be transfigured. And so Moses veils himself when he speaks to the people, who are not ready, or willing, to be transformed. But as St. Paul writes in our Epistle, when one turns to Christ, that veil is removed, pulled aside, as in today's Gospel. "And all of us," Paul writes, "with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." My friends, this is the goal of all of our rituals, traditions, and sacraments: that we be transformed into the image of Christ, that image in which we were created, and yet which we have hidden even from ourselves by veil after veil of our own making. It is my prayer that, as we enter this holy season of Lent this Wednesday, each of us might, using whatever practices and tools are most helpful for us, be transformed, more and more, into the image and likeness of Christ, which is our True Self.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> <https://gratefulness.org/resource/dsr-mystical-core-religion/>

<sup>2</sup> Luke 5:37-39

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ssje.org/2006/08/06/the-feast-of-the-transfiguration/>