

SLD02.18.07 Transfiguration Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
Exodus 34:29-35
Luke 9:28-36

“A Glimpse of Glory”

You heard the story: Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray, all night probably. And, as is bound to happen, the disciples drift off to sleep. Have you ever tried praying all night?

But before long, a kind of emanation disturbs them, like a car rounding a corner with its brights on. The disciples shift in half-sleep and wait for it to pass. But the light grows with a warmth and life of its own and envelopes them, penetrating both their closed eyes and their sleep. Shielding their faces, they peer with squinting curiosity at what appears to be three figures:

"Is that our Jesus? Is that...no...could that be Moses? And Elijah?

Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, ... glowing? This is really weird!"

The figures appear to be talking among themselves. The disciples lean close: "Can you hear what they're saying? Jesus is leaving? Did you know Jesus was leaving? Where's he going? What is going on here!?"

The figures of Moses and Elijah begin to fade away. Suddenly Peter jumps up to address Jesus. "Master, handy we're all here, isn't it? How 'bout a lean-to? Want us to build a lean-to, get out of the sun a minute? Here's some canvas, a little goat skin, some twine. How about a little hut for each of you guys?"

And the text tells us, "he did not know what he was saying."

Ya' think?

Here Jesus' face is reflecting the glory of God and all that comes to Peter is to make like a Boy Scout and pitch a tent? Sure, building booths is what Jews did back then to commemorate really important moments in history. And you get two prophets and Messiah to show up and glow, that's a pretty important moment. But still, in the face of the ineffable, of the awesome, of the *divine*...chatter about a building campaign?

Clearly something is missing. And sure enough, even as Peter is flapping his lips, a cloud overshadows the disciples and from it God says, "Peter, hush. Stop what you're doing. This is my Son, my *Chosen One*. Be still...zip your lips...and LISTEN to him!"

From beginning to end, a strange story. Why is Luke telling such a tale? Why focus on what one commentary calls "an intense religious experience of an uncertain nature," only to elaborate on Peter's awkward reaction to it?

Reckon Luke felt awkward about it, too? Or anticipated how uncomfortable future disciples, especially of the Presbyterian variety, would feel about Jesus' Transfiguration? Glowing faces, dazzling clothes, prophetic poltergeists...it all feels more...Catholic, maybe. Or Hollywood. "Touched By A Messiah."

And clearly we're not the only ones that think it's weird. Never mind Peter, Jesus' disciples have *always* preferred Jesus to keep his head out of the clouds and his feet on the ground. And after his death, *in* the ground, so to speak. Did Peter and John believe Mary when she said she'd seen the risen Lord? Did Thomas believe the post-resurrection sightings of the other disciples? Did *anybody* trust the conversion of Paul the Persecuter?

Jesus' disciples have always preferred him to be a more "down-to-earth" kind of guy. And sure enough, apart from the odd mind-blowing miracle, that's how the gospels

generally portray him. He eats, he sleeps, he weeps, he prays, he parties; he gets impatient, loses his temper once in a while. Sure Jesus is God and all, but he's also, as affirmed by the 5th century Council of Chalcedon, pretty much just a guy.

Nevertheless, every year right about this time, shortly after Epiphany, just before Lent, there goes Jesus up that mountain again to enter that etheric, otherworldly, twilight zone realm that's a complete mystery to most of us. Whatever happens on that mountain defies all doctrine and description as well as anything remotely recognizable in most of our personal experience.

I mean, some of us can testify to miracles, or conversions, or transformations of the heart. But glowing? Okay, maybe we glow a little when we're in love, or pregnant, or just in from a good run. But in the company of prophets? With talking clouds?

Strange story. What is Luke up to?

Well, it might be important to know first that the primary aim of the whole of Luke's gospel is to witness to who Jesus is. In fact, earlier in the same chapter of today's text, Jesus asks his disciples directly who people think he is. The disciples answer, "some say you're John the Baptist. Others think you're Elijah or one of the other prophets." "But who do *you* say that I am?" asks Jesus. To which ole Peter, ever quick on the draw, answers, "You are the Messiah of God."

Then comes today's story of Jesus' Transfiguration which, beside letting us know that Peter doesn't have a clue, tells us what about Jesus' identity?

Well, setting aside for the moment the operatic special effects, the appearance of Moses and Elijah in the story is intended to establish Jesus as a full peer of the Great Ones

of Israel's past. And then what happens? The two prophets fade away, and who's left? Who's still glowing? Of all the prophetic divines of Israel's history, who's got the most wattage? Can you see what Luke's getting at?

For the gospel writer of Luke, the grand prophets Moses and Elijah represent the *old* guard, the covenant of the Law, while Jesus embodies the *new* covenant of grace. They're all blessed carriers of God's covenant, all Anointed Ones, but Jesus is the *final* testament; the *fulfillment* of the law.

Now recall the testimony of the two prophets (while they're still around) about what's fixin' to happen to Jesus in Jerusalem? Not only is Luke foreshadowing (yet again) what lies before Jesus, he is firmly positioning Jesus' impending death as the fulfillment of everything that came before in the Hebrews' holy history. Jesus is not only a prophet among the Great Ones, his coming is the fulfillment of all foretold by the Hebrew scriptures.

But why go to such lengths to describe Peter's peculiar reaction to this "intense religious experience of an uncertain nature?" Why, in the face of God's reflected glory, portray Peter as clumsy, foolish and disengaged?

Compare Peter's response to the transfigured Jesus to Aaron's when Moses comes down the mountain after *his* encounter with God. When Moses' face shines with God's glory, Aaron and the others are afraid to come near him. In fact, scripture tells us that after saying what he has to say, Moses covers his face with a veil so he won't keep scaring people. In contrast, in Luke's tale, we witness more awkwardness than awe, more fussiness than fear, more reality-shock than reverence.

Who reminds you more of you and me, of people today – Aaron or Peter?

Myself, I relate more to Peter. Saturated with the extraordinary, inundated with the remarkable, endlessly impressed with the smaller, faster and more efficient, we in today's world have, after all, witnessed with our own eyes everything from the man on the moon to microscopic mitochondria. From our very own living rooms we can casually, and safely, observe the shimmering rings of Jupiter, the lackluster invasion of Baghdad, the starving in Somalia. While sorting laundry on our sofa, we can witness a bank robbery, the birth of a baby, or bin Laden's message of the month.

For all we throw around the word "awesome" these days, I'm not personally convinced that anything short of a personal visit by aliens or the Second Coming itself would really blow our doors off. And I'm not too sure about the Second Coming. I mean, there was Peter right in the middle of the First Coming of Jesus, and the second coming of Moses and Elijah, and we don't exactly see him falling to his knees in the face of the soon-to-be-rising Son.

Maybe Luke's point is that Jesus' disciples have always felt a little clumsy before the mystery and majesty of God. If we even experience it at all.

In her book, *Holy The Firm*, Annie Dillard comments that "the higher Christian churches (that's us)....come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think," says Dillard, "of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. ...If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches (think

Holiness or Primitive Baptist) you expect it any minute. This," remarks Dillard, "is the beginning of wisdom." (p.59)

Could it also be the beginning of authentic worship, that imminent sense of the danger, and mystery, and power of the presence of God? Could we mainstream Protestants have become a shade too complacent in our confidence? A tad too flaccid in our faith? Just a bit too slack in our tepid expectations of God's tender mercies?

I must say, in the warmth and routine of our worship, we do tend to traffic in a rather tame and manageable God, don't we. As Ruth Duck remarks in her book by the same name, most of us "would rather exchange fellowship than touch holiness."

Of course, knee-trembling fear of God is often associated with that wrathful, punishing Avenger who expressed such impatience with those hard-headed Israelites, and we don't worship such a God. We know that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed us from slavery to the law, and the consequences of our sin, and we are a forgiven people. But I can't help but wonder sometimes if, in our worship, we aren't inclined sometimes to remain, like Peter, self-referenced and unmoved, here more to exchange fellowship than to touch holiness.

Hear these words from Dillard's *Teaching A Stone To Talk*: "It is difficult, she says, "to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind use to cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of earth, and living things

say very little to very few. ...*What have we been doing all these centuries,*" asks Dillard, "*but trying to call God back to the mountain?*"

You know, maybe neither Peter nor you and I have any idea what happened up there on that mountain in Luke's story, but I say we hunger for it just the same – that mysterious, transfiguring glimpse of glory God offers through Christ Jesus.

For what else, really, is worship but an invitation to experience and dwell in the transforming presence of God?

And our part - what is it? How do we call God back to the mountain where we worship, that we might experience once again that sense of mystery and wonderment in the face of God's reflected glory?

A difficult question, especially to those of us who spend much time and energy trying to provide conditions for meaningful worship. Whenever we press the edges of tradition and routines, explore alternative styles of preaching, or different music, or new modes of congregational participation, our aim is to bring new freshness and possibility to liturgical acts, to awaken a rightful sense of the awesome presence of the glory of God.

Yet "intense religious experiences of an uncertain nature" are not deliverable to the door of an unopened heart or the gate of a distracted mind, not even by Jesus himself to his loving disciple, Peter. Could Peter have done something different to prepare himself? Can we? We who yearn to be transformed and renewed by the glory of God, do we have a part in calling God back to the mountain?

To the glory of God. Amen.