

Transfiguration – Last Sunday after Epiphany – Year C

This morning we are at one of those cusp moments – “cusp” meaning a point of transition between one thing and another. We are celebrating the last Sunday after the Epiphany – our final celebration of the Epiphany season – before we begin the season of Lent this week on Ash Wednesday.

As we will sing in our Post communion hymn, Epiphany has been a time of looking at all the ways God has been made manifest, a time of looking at the ways God reveals Godself to us. We have celebrated God Incarnate in Jesus, and then – lest we forget – each week in the blessing we have remembered God revealed in the light to the wise men, and in the Spirit at the baptism, and in the glad hearts at the wedding feast at Cana. And on this last Sunday of Epiphany, every year, we have the story of the Transfiguration – perhaps as a final confirmation that God has revealed Godself in Jesus. We are told, in Luke’s version that we heard today, that *while Jesus was praying*, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

In the first reading from Exodus, something similar happens to Moses after he has been in the presence of God. We are told, “Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” – Being in the presence of God *changes* us. Being in the presence of God has the power to *transform* us. But we don’t always want the change.

In the reading from Exodus, Moses comes down the mountain and gives the people the words he received from God. He’s bringing them, in essence, God’s presence as they knew it in that time – in the law, and in the shining face of Moses. And we know their response. We have heard it in other readings. They are quite content to let Moses talk to God, because no one else can look at the face of God and live.

And I think, my friends, that this is the truth for us today – we cannot look at the face of God and live – live as we have lived before. We cannot look at the face of God and *not* be changed. One of the costs or responsibilities or privileges that ensues from intimate contact with God that Moses has and contact with Jesus that the apostles have on the mountain is that it changes us, or it has the *power* to change us.

I think when we are confronted with close contact with God, we have one of three options open to us. Like the Israelites in the first reading, we can choose to keep our distance. We will obey the rules, but let's keep things just as they are, thank you. The life-changing and face-changing encounters are for other people like Moses. I do this sometimes, when I avoid taking real time for quiet, or when I keep so busy *doing* that I don't have any time for *being*. Let me just *avoid* any experience where I think God might be lurking!

A second option is to try to hang on to one of those "mountaintop" experiences, like Peter in the Gospel – to claim it as mine and mine alone. I want to stay there, in the glow and in the know. I am *happy* – quite content to have had that experience of God's presence. And I can spend a great deal of time, then, recounting the experience, and trying to reproduce it – for myself.

But the third option is the one presented to us by the voice in today's Gospel and presented to us by Jesus. The third option is to be forever changed. When Peter and James and John see the transformed Jesus, while they are just getting into relishing it, the voice says, "This is my son, my Chosen; Listen to him." The word "listen" in Hebrew is Shema – which means to hear and respond. To hear and obey. And what Jesus has most recently said to these same apostles, just before they go up the mountain to pray, is this: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

We have all met people who have countenances that speak of their close encounter with the divine, and just looking on those people very often draws us to ask questions about what stands in the way of OUR transfiguration, our transformation. The statement that the Israelites have, that says you cannot look upon the face of God and live, need not be literal. It says what Jesus says, and what the voice tells us to listen to: that following Jesus requires that whatever in us is NOT of God must wither, must die, because it cannot stand in the presence of the Divine. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Jesus calls a person, he bids them come and die."

What stands in the way of our own transformation, then, is most often our own fear of change. Christian Century writer Denise Anderson says, “In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of Moses and of the Israelites’ veil, the hardening of the mind that kept them from fully living into the glory of God. They didn’t want to be changed. Neither do we at times. We don’t know what change will mean for us, what it will take away from us, where it will call us to go, or what it will call us to do.” Yes, we cannot know what shape our cross will take, or what parts of our lives we are called to let die.

When Moses and Elijah were gone, when Jesus and the apostles came down the mountain the next day – to the level ground once more, the greatness of God was again revealed – not in dazzling white clothes or a glowing face, but in healing and restoration. The effects of our encounters with God are to be shared. Paul says, “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.” That was, in fact, our opening collect: 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...”

This cusp we stand on today, this transition from Epiphany into Lent, then, is where we grapple with what we do with the revelation of God that we have seen. Laying before us is the season of Lent – a wonderful time for transformation.

God reveals Godself to us all the time. Whether we are looking, or listening, or whether we respond or not, that is up to us.

Yesterday was the Bishop’s gathering with the Central Region of the Diocese. I was able to “attend” because they live-streamed the conference. The day was centered around another potential transition. As the Bishop put it, the day centered around the invitation of the Diocese of Eastern Michigan to “dance” with them by allowing them to call our Bishop to be their provisional bishop for the next 3-5 years. What was most relevant for us this morning, I thought, were the questions folks were asked to answer as part of the discernment process. – I think they are good questions for us to carry with us today in this transition from Epiphany to Lent, questions about how we treat the opportunity we have in experiencing God, and in really immersing ourselves in the transformative journey of Lent:

What might we gain by accepting this opportunity? What might we *lose* by accepting this opportunity?
What might we gain by *not* entering into this experience? What might we lose by *not* accepting this opportunity?
And I will add this question: What will happen to us if we look upon the face of God? If we risk transformation? It will transform us and the worlds we inhabit, because people will not be able to look at us and not see the effect of the transformation. It's meant to be shared, not hidden behind a veil. This little light of mine... may it shine.

Grant to us, Gracious God, 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..."

Amen.

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