

Transfiguration Sunday
The Rev. Micki Shirey
Luke 9: 28-36
February 14, 2010

We are on the doorstep of Lent this morning.

The weeks pass so quickly between the end of Christmastide and the beginning of Lent. Weren't we just watching the children hang the last of the ornaments on the tree here in the chancel? Didn't we just light the Christ candle at the center of our Advent wreath?

Parts of this sermon have been stirring in me since the first Sunday of Advent. I got here just a few minutes before 10:00 and took a seat way in the back corner because the sanctuary was already overflowing with worshipers.

That particular Sunday, the lectionary gave us a gospel reading from the end Luke. The reading was kind of dark and kind of apocalyptic and, quite frankly, was a jarring way to begin Advent. An aspect of Jesus' voice that's unfamiliar to most of us spoke through time that Sunday; he said "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." In fact, a few sentences after the end of that reading Judas betrays Jesus and the events leading up to the crucifixion begin.

Hearing that reading on the first Sunday of Advent reminded me that, in one way or another, no matter where we are in the Christian story, we're always talking about crucifixion and resurrection. Whatever the season is on the church calendar, our faith is always ultimately about the Easter story.

As I looked around at our overflowing sanctuary on that first Advent Sunday and watched all of the children come up into the chancel for the opening of the Advent story, I was very moved by how much we are an Advent congregation. I thought to myself, "Look at how we love this story! We are really not a Lent and Easter congregation."

This thought prompted some questions that followed me through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany: how do we, as lovers of the Advent and Christmas story, connect with Lent and Easter? How do we, as followers of Emmanuel—believers in the ongoing birth of God with us—make sense of the cross?

Sr. Helen Prejean stood here a few weeks ago and very powerfully reminded us that this cross, this symbol we've become so accustomed to as a symbol of what - God's love? God's mercy? God's compassion? Was, at the time of Jesus and to the early Church, a symbol of suffering and profound shame.

It's this shameful cross that we see the early church trying to cope with throughout the New Testament: if Jesus was who we thought he was, if Jesus was the Messiah, if Jesus was the Chosen One of God, then the cross would never have happened. An executed Messiah is no Messiah at all. The first followers of Jesus had no way of knowing that two-thousand years later people around the globe would still be talking about this Jesus and trying to figure out what his life meant and why his life has the power, still, to transform our lives. No, in fact the followers of Jesus feared the opposite. They feared that they had left everything and followed him for nothing.

But the stories didn't die and the powerful sense of Jesus' presence in the community didn't die. Indeed, the most fantastic of the stories spoke of a mysterious resurrection of the one called Jesus.

As it does every year on this Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany, the lectionary gives us the story of the Transfiguration. Marcus Borg reminds us in his book *Jesus: A New Vision*, that this story clearly places Jesus in the tradition of charismatic preachers and prophets. This brief story includes details that sparked the imagination of its first hearers just as it sparks ours.

Powerful things happen to holy people who go to the mountain top. Mountains appear in biblical texts as places where God dwells and where holy people go to be in the presence of God. Mountains are places of refuge and, throughout Jesus ministry, places of prayer and transition. We know something meaningful is going to happen when the story begins, "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up in the mountain to pray."

I don't know about you, but the experience Jesus has is one that I long for—it's the theophany, the manifestation of God that Greg spoke of last Sunday. This theophany is so profound that Jesus' face, his clothes, and his very being become dazzling white—the color of heavenly garments in the New Testament that we still reserve for the highest feasts: Christmas, Easter, and, yes, Transfiguration Sunday.

Peter's first thought when he sees Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus is to build tents for all of them and make the experience last as long as possible, but before anyone can respond a cloud came and overshadowed them. The writer of Luke uses the same word to describe the disciple's experience on the mountain top that he used to describe the experience of God that Mary was promised by the angel, Gabriel, at the Annunciation: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; ..." (Luke 1:35)

The writer of Luke wants us to know that this overshadowing experience is from God and that the voice that speaks to the disciples is from the Most High: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." Marcus Borg reminds us that this story is difficult to make sense of historically—on the level of did this actually happen—but it provides us with significant evidence about Jesus' identity among the earliest Christians. Traditionally, the Transfiguration has been interpreted in a couple of different ways. This event is either seen as Jesus' true divine form breaking through his human form or as a glimpse of Jesus' glory that will be fully realized in the resurrection.

What's intriguing to me is the fact that this story, from one gospel or another, is always selected for this particular Sunday of the year. How curious to hear of Jesus' face and clothes transfigured to a dazzling white only to be invited back a few days from now to have our foreheads smudged with ashes.

When I was a little girl, we always went to church for an evening service on Ash Wednesday. The service was pretty much like any other, except for the curious ritual at the beginning where we went to the alter rail, not to be fed with bread and wine, but for the imposition of ashes.

The words of this ritual formed a sort of rhythmic chant or mantra as the whole congregation quietly walked forward. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

By the time I made it to the front of the church, the pastor's thumb was well blackened and his face solemn. I'd lift up my bangs and shut my eyes to keep stray bits of ash from falling in. The ashes made a sound a bit like chalk on a blackboard only just inside my head. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Later, I'd go home and look in the mirror to see what the cross looked like, wondering if I could wash it off right away or if I should keep it there for a while.

Long before Carl Sagan was telling us that we were made of "star stuff" our faith has taught us that we are dust.

Perhaps this is what surprised Peter, James, and John the most on the mountain top when they saw Jesus glow from within and be in the company of Moses and Elijah. Here was this man, this teacher who they lived with and walked with who they knew perfectly well to be made of dust just like they were.

Peter usually gets a bad rap for wanting to build the booths and hang out on the mountain top with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It's usually held up as one of the many moments in the gospels in which Peter misses the point. The criticism of Peter usually goes something like, "how foolish of Peter to imagine that he can keep the living God all to himself." What I think Peter saw on the mountain top that day was the reality that God can transfigure mortal, dusty human beings like you, and me, and Jesus, and Peter, and Mary, and Moses, and Elijah into God-filled holy people.

Advent and Lent are both seasons in which we're asked to look at our mortality. Advent is easy because the question is "what is being born in me?" or "what is being born anew in me?" Lent is not so easy because the question is simply harder to face, "what is dying in me?"

There are very few absolute statements that any preacher can make about life's truths, but this I know to be true: every single one of us will live the full circle of life from birth to death. The life and ministry of Jesus that gives shape to our Christian faith gives us the opportunity to learn how to live well. It also gives us the opportunity to learn how to die well and that Jesus of Nazareth who, in resurrection, becomes the living Christ somehow mysteriously teaches us how to live well in community and how to die well in community. This, I believe, is why we are asked to make both the Advent journey and the Lenten journey year after year.

Dear People of God: the first Christians observed with great devotion the days of Jesus' passion and resurrection, and it became a custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. I invite you, therefore, to the observance of a holy Lent, by prayer, fasting, and the contemplation of God's holy Mysteries.