

Last Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon for February 3, 2008
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Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 2 or 99
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

Today – this Sunday is the Last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. Short season to perceive the manifestation of the divine amidst the human, and we end with that bright, shining hope poised on a mountain top, bequeath to humankind in the witness of a stumbling Galilean who is given the keys to the kingdom. This is a transfiguring event.

This is it. No longer the witness of shepherds or magi of a birth foretold by the voices of angels and the movement of stars, but the witness of three men standing with their teacher. They hear again what was said at the baptism: “this is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.” And there comes the admonition: “Listen to him!”

And we are told independently by Peter in his epistle of this voice they heard coming from heaven: “This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And we heard Peter swearing: “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Peter pleads with his people. “I am not making this stuff up. I was there with his disciples. We saw this with our own eyes, we heard this with our own ears. This is the truth. God spoke to Jesus and we heard it.”

It is the glory of God come down to earth, bestowing a blessing on Jesus the son, and on the disciples who are with him. It is the glory of God resting on the shoulders of the man who taught the disciples to be better human beings. “This is my beloved son. To him I give glory, laud and honor.” And if that isn’t clear enough, God adds: “listen to him.”

And what does Jesus have to say?

Let’s go back to the beginning of the reading today. You see, I have a problem with this version of the reading because it isn’t Scriptural.

What we heard today from the Revised Common Lectionary says: “Six days after Peter said that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John, and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.”

The NRSV actually reads: “Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.”

What's the difference? A lot, to my way of thinking, because Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, and was dutifully rewarded with the keys to the kingdom: "You are Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my church." The difficulty is that the way the reading today links Peter's confession with the transfiguration is misleading. What intervenes between Peter's proclamation of Jesus as the Christ is Peter's denial of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah.

I am convinced that when Peter called Jesus the Messiah, his understanding was that of most Jews at that time: the Messiah would come in great glory and throw of the oppressors of God's people. The Messiah would be the King of the Jews, a warrior in the line of David to lift up Israel to rule itself again.

That was not the messiah that Jesus describes to his disciples. And when Jesus tells them that the Messiah must suffer and die, Peter exclaims: 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'

And Jesus turns to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

I would suggest that this is the reference that needs to be linked to the transfiguration, not Peter's confession of Jesus as Lord.

The transfiguration was not underlining Peter's confession, but showing Peter and James and John that Jesus' kingship was not what they thought it was, but something entirely different.

So we find Jesus with Moses and Elijah, and what does Peter want: Let's turn this into a Kodak moment. Let's freeze this event in time and make it last forever. So, blundering forth, Peter blurts out: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwelling here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

How human of Peter to want to save that mountain top experience. It is just so endearing of Peter. Here's us. Right here. Telling God we want to make this moment last forever. Asking the impossible, that we don't have to leave that place where we are most comfortable, most at home, most happy.

And not only that, but being told that having experienced something that is just staggering, and wondrous: "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

This is the last Sunday of Epiphany. We have seen the birth of the Christ Child, the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan when the Heavens parted and the voice of God spoke to us directly, and the appearance of God's glory on the mountaintop.

In three days we will be observing Ash Wednesday as we enter the 40 days of Lent. Those long weeks of self-reflection as we wander in our personal wilderness. This time in

the wilderness need not be a time of darkness. Remember the glory, the light, the hope of the world as that point of departure as we move relentlessly forward toward that bright light of Easter morning.

This may not be a direct path. It probably won't be. I came upon a prayer by Thomas Merton, that wise Trappist Monk. As we wander this Lent, let us each remember his words.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen