

“Light Breaking Forth”

Transfiguration Sunday

Mark 9:2-9

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination:

Illumine these words for us, O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, as your word is read and proclaimed this day. Silence in us any voice by your own, strengthen us for all that is before us. Amen.

In the 1998, Saint John's Abbey and University in Minnesota began a combined work of art and a work of theology. They commissioned a renowned calligrapher from Wales, named Donald Jackson, to produce a hand-written, hand-illuminated Bible. The Saint John's Bible. Together with Mr. Jackson, the monks embarked on an endeavor to illumine the Bible rooted in Benedictine spirituality.

They set out to create a Bible that would capture the beauty and tradition of centuries of liturgies and carry it into the future. It was a multi-year, multi-volume project. Many hands recreated letter by letter, line by line the passages of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. These illuminations of scripture are breathtaking. Gold leaf, unique images and vibrant colors intertwined with scriptural text. Classic. Modern. Pointed into the future. When I saw it and investigated more of these images, I was taken by the illumination for today's text of Transfiguration.

In this illumination, two people, Moses and Elijah, in blue and red garments flank Jesus. His garment – dazzled white with gold crosses. But the face of Jesus, the face of the Holy is obscure. The decision to leave the face of Jesus vague is intentional. In fact, to leave the face of Jesus hazy is to invite the observer in to see herself or himself in that place. This offers the viewer a closeness to God, a closeness to the very presence of God, and yet the face-----is mysterious.

This transfiguration passage we read in the gospels every year is strange yarn. Just a few days before, Jesus asks the disciples “who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Messiah.”

Today Jesus takes Peter, James and John, these worthy disciples up the mountain for a morning hike. But it’s no ordinary day hike. Personally, I would have hoped Jesus would have taken more water breaks and packed a few more CLIF bars and trail mix. Jesus heads right up that mountain.

For the disciples, this “out of world” experience reveals more about who Jesus is. In what have to be moments of terror, Peter, James and John, see Jesus transformed, changed, transfigured, before their very eyes. Amidst the cloud, encircling them, a voice declares, “this is my Son, the Beloved;

listen to him.” The cloud dissipates. Moses and Elijah vanish. Only Jesus remains.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus orders them to tell no one about what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. But they wondered too. It’s all too mysterious.

The message the disciples heard was about affirmation, intimacy and love. Who wouldn’t want to hear those words of affirmation from a parent or a partner. It’s the celebration of God’s remarkable embrace of Jesus on the mountaintop. God claims Jesus with words of affirmation. Jesus knows these words, he’s heard them before, rising from waters of his baptism, “This is my son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.”

This passage is also about our closeness to God. It’s an account of the “intimacy of our faith.” But like the disciples, I bet we fear the intimacy that this text offers. Do we ever have this kind of intimacy with God, being so close to God’s presence to hear God’s voice?

Being in the presence of God is hard for these disciples. They are terrified. It is hard for us. It might make us a little uncomfortable. We often cram our days and our nights with noise or things, so as to not have space to hear God’s

voice...God's words to us. We are a people who like to keep up boundaries and maintain personal space.

We are not able to quiet the internal noise in our heads long enough to experience God's presence. We would have a hard time in our closeness to God because, like in a movie theater, we are a "leave a seat in between" kind of people. We often choose not to sit right next to someone we don't know in the movie theater, for fear of invading their space or crunching our popcorn a little too loud.

We couldn't do that, let alone cozy up to the presence of God. We might even be the group that would rather keep its distance from the front of sanctuary and not sit so close to our neighbor in the pew. We keep our distance. But on the mountaintop, God comes close.

The challenge for us is to live in close proximity to God. We are intrigued and yet we resist. But when we do live into the intimacy of our faith, we have the opportunity to embody and to radiate God's love to the world. It is in the closeness that God calls us. And it is where God sustains us.

Transfiguration is about affirmation and intimacy. And it is also about Love. Which brings me the season of Lent, which begins this Wednesday (Ash Wednesday). The Transfiguration

and Lent both beckon us look inside ourselves, cozy up and get close to God.

Today, we leave the light of Epiphany. Today, on that mountain top, Jesus turns. Jesus turns his face toward the cross and comes down off the mountain. His ministry moves him from Galilee and points him to Jerusalem. Jesus can't stay on that mountain. Jesus has to come down off that mountain. This journey to his arrest, trial, betrayal, pain, crucifixion and death begins today.

Lent is the season of inspection. Sometimes when we spend time reflecting on our lives and walking as close to God as we can, we sometimes do not want to face God with the reality of things we have done. We don't want to draw attention to those things we leave undone. Maybe we would tremble with fear of our own self-admissions? Maybe our eyes would fill up with tears amidst the pain that we carry? Maybe we are fearful of to speak the truth?

Let's be honest, Jesus heads to Jerusalem. It's all downhill from here. Because Jesus is love, love always has to come down off that mountain. Love can't stay at a romantic dinner or on a sunset beach or on a mountaintop. Love must come down. Love must go where it is most needed. And it is most needed not on the high point of success and power and beauty. Love

is most needed down in the valleys. In the rough places. This is where love goes. Love goes into the darkest, the deepest parts of the world that are hurting and makes its presence known.

The symbol of love is not a heart – it's a cross – the cross that will be placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday--well, that's a sign of love. That's what Jesus' love looks like.

The last time Ash Wednesday fell on Valentine's Day, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President. Instead of cards and chocolate and dinner with one you love this Wednesday, I invite you to join us here, bring a friend, for the journey into love. Love comes down. This same love invites us to Lent. Into the hardest places of our lives. Into the places where we need forgiveness and where we need to forgive others. When life gets hard, love enters. Love enters for reconciliation. Love enters for restoration of our own brokenness. Love meets us where we are.

On Wednesday, when the ashes are put on –we are reminded of our mortality, our fragility, our frailty, our limitations – remember that those ashes are about love – Jesus' love for us as we are – love in the shape of a cross – sacrificial love – a reminder that love that is stronger than death.

Love comes down, into a world to serve a world that is hurting, a world where injustice and discrimination is pervasive. We acknowledge the difficulty and pain that is inherent in our lives. We have lost loved ones. We live in a world riddled with crippling natural disasters, mudslides, damaging storms and earthquakes. We live in a world of crime and addiction. A world where wealth yields privilege. We have not lived up to our very best. We have not honored all who God wants us to honor. We do not take this journey to wallow in our tragedy, but to be reminded of the hard to believe reality that God's glory is to be found in the very midst of our humanity.

God offers us love each and every day. We find the intimacy of our faith when we walk just as closely as we can to the one who would lead us to his death....and then, who promises to be with us when he rises again.

So, in this Lenten season, may you experience a journey of affirmation, intimacy and love. May the season of Lent lead you on a journey like no other. A journey with Love and into Love where we will forever changed. Amen.

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