

Transfiguration – 7Feb16

Luke9:28-36;

Exodus34:29-35;

2Corinthians3:12-4:2

Sometimes these pieces of lectionary and liturgical seasons come together so well to enrich our experience of faith.

With that, it was cautioned in worship and preaching classes against inventing too much on one's own; that if I were choosing Bible readings, I might get into a rut of focusing on gratitude or hitting you over the heads about not gossiping or with pet projects and favorite verses overemphasizing Romans 8 or Genesis 1. So using lectionary Bible readings gives variety and a chance to notice peculiar ways the readings relate to each other (as we see today). It can also make us have to wrestle to find good news.

To highlight benefits of the shape of liturgical seasons, we celebrate this festival of Transfiguration as the last Sunday after Epiphany. This season began several weeks ago with the Baptism of Jesus. In both of these Gospel readings, a heavenly voice speaks over Jesus: "This is my Son, the beloved." "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." For a season that is pointing our attention to Jesus and revealing who he is in our midst, these bookends help clarify and reinforce it.

Similarly, Transfiguration is the Sunday before we begin the season of Lent. Lately we've returned to an ancient pattern of the Lenten season being a time of spring cleaning, of preparations, of rejuvenating our faith and getting ready for baptismal celebrations and new life of Easter. But for a while the Church had observed Lent as a time of sorrow and lament and focusing on the crucifixion. In those former dismal times, Transfiguration could have been a final burst of brightness before dim difficult weeks of drudgery. Now it isn't so much a sustenance to get us through but is

another sort of bookend, a glimpse of resurrection that we are living toward and anticipating.

These experiences of faith in the carefully planned shape of the seasons are potential and a possibility but not, however, a given amid the shape of our lives and other rhythms. For example, this year it's been tough to hold this whole season of Epiphany together as a unified whole when we have been in transition and going through so much change, with goodbyes and hellos, together as this MCC community and as individuals.

Another example of how these seasons do or don't function is that next week is the 1st Sunday *in* Lent, not *of* Lent. Sundays are always mini-Easters, a weekly chance for resurrected good news. So Sundays should always be filled with Hallelujahs, even as the rest of Lenten days could be more quietly reflective. But if we don't have opportunity to live into the season other than on Sundays—if that's our main time for church and for faith and for God—then to feel the contrast we have to remove the joyous praise and reshape Sundays to feel "Lent-ier."

Our lives may contain lots of faithfulness but still are not defined by the rhythms of the church year; we face also odd politics and illnesses or hurts and busy days and our personal celebrations and struggles. Yet amid all of that other stuff, this churchiness may glance off of us and shape us to some degree, and God is still continue working to form us.

That's actually also where we can be seeing ourselves in the perspective of this day. For all the intention and glorious display, in the end this has to be about our ordinary lives and how God is made known not just in grand encounters but in the very commonplace. On a day of readings filled with shining faces (and maybe shining faces the lectionary has smushed together but which don't really match), it takes some work to get to our own faces, some

figuring on how the readings relate and wrestling for good news. But, again, that's a fruitful and exciting task, so let's get to it.

We can go ahead and start with Moses in the reading from Exodus. In the course of the story, Moses has already had a lot of time visiting with God, from the burning bush and the "let my people go" with all the plagues haunting Pharaoh and parting the Red Sea and escaping from the Egyptian army. Then they came to Mount Sinai. Moses went up to receive 10 Commandments, plus regulations and guidelines for living in community, and also recipes and a calendar of holidays and more. While Moses was long-engaged in that work, the people got bored and impatient and—as they say about idle hands—ended up making a golden calf. Moses, though also very angry, argued or interceded or prayed for his people, and God reminded Godself, I AM "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity" (34:6-7).

Well, after all of that, Moses had smashed the original stone tablets of the Commandments, and so had to go back up the mountain and ask for a photocopy. As Moses returns, our reading says that he didn't know his face was shiny because he'd been talking with God. It was so brilliantly beaming he had to put a cover over it.

Aside from wondering if he still needed a flashlight to get around at night or how this goes against Jesus talking about bushel baskets and telling us to let our light shine before others, at the outset we can't help but notice that this is a peculiar, particular situation for Moses. It's apparent that, after time talking to God in prayer, none of us has ended up with glowing faces. Moses is special.

The image on your bulletins shows some of this. This Michelangelo sculpture, besides seeming to show Moses' potential as an arm-

wrestler, also depicts him with two horns. Some have said that Michelangelo was working with a bad Bible translation, but the Hebrew word here actually is the word for horns (nrq qaran). Some figure that's a word for beams or rays of light, which can, indeed, be the same shape as a horn. Others figure that horns may be okay in themselves, because the altar also had horns, and that was a holy place connected with the presence of God, so this is another way of saying that Moses also was where they could go to meet God.

We might note that the reaction to seeing Moses was that the people were afraid. Now, if he had horns growing out of his head we might especially understand the fear. Even if he was extra shiny, people might back away. But at the core, there's something about God's presence that is dangerous and unapproachable. So Moses has to put a bag over his head just so people would be willing to talk to him.

That might bring us to the Gospel reading. Some of that fear and uncertainty persists in Peter's reaction. If we met the grandest of past saintly heroes brightly shining in community neither would we have any idea what to say, and would likewise mutter something incomprehensible. This is the paradigm of a mountaintop experience, the guru-est of gurus up there, basking in a warm glow of ethereal wonder. With Moses, Elijah was the other big name of our Old Testament, as law and prophets, these were the embodiments of the scriptures themselves. In other parallels this is like having Einstein and Galileo together, or Shakespeare and da Vinci, or Gandhi and Mother Teresa, or (with the Super Bowl today) Vince Lombardi and Jerry Rice...or whatever ultimate pairing you can come up with. With apologies to history's gender inequity, perhaps we could see Sarah and Miriam in the biblical role.

Yet more importantly, from that dazzling, grandest, highest, premier, ultimate setting, we have a huge contrast, a change of tone, even altering the mood lighting. Unlike the Exodus reading where Moses had to keep covered up afterward, in this setting the glow dissipates. In the next verses, Jesus heads back down the mountain and gets back to work, facing problems and met by crowds of people who need his help and who can be frustrating. You know, like regular life.

Even more, in Luke's setting this Transfiguration is a transition point in the Gospel. From here, Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, which means toward betrayal and arrest and the cross and death. It might be that the Gospel writer wants a residual hint of this brightness to linger in our minds as we go on to face so much darkness and sorrow and desertion and, it would have to seem, God-forsakenness.

These contrasts become even starker with our reading from 2nd Corinthians that brings *our* lives into the picture. For readings about shiny faces, this one faces in the opposite direction. Not only are we not in the elite mountaintop tier of the greatest sorts of heroes, not only do we not seem so luminous or glorious, but even seem so regular or dull that we have lots of room to doubt whether our lives could be the place of God's presence and work.

Paul uses the image of a mirror in this reading. When we look in mirrors, we expect to see more wrinkles or gray hairs. We may expect bags under our eyes and not-quite perfect smiles. Our teeth don't even glow bright white, much less our foreheads beam a shining ray of light. That's not to disparage what we see. It's not to say you can't or shouldn't be pleased or content when you look in the mirror. It's just reality, just regular life. None of us looks in the mirror and sees horns growing out of our head, marking a special relationship with God and the divine presence at work in us.

Yet in contrast to those fabulous stories and the saintly heroes of bygone times, in contrast to haloes of light and marks of glory, still Paul says that when you look in the mirror, when you look at each other's very normal faces, what you are seeing is the place of God's work. That face is even more glorious and miraculous than the face of Moses. In the presence of Jesus, with this one who went to a cross and died and rose, through the encounter with him here in worship, in Word and Sacrament, in notably unremarkable bread and a splash of wine, through meeting him in the faces of each other and in the faces of those in need, through this ministry, you are being transformed into his same image. When you look in a mirror, you look like Christ. When you look at each other, you see Christ. When God looks at you, you are the very image of God. Today isn't just the Transfiguration of our Lord; it's his transfiguration of you.

Rejoicing with all the faithful, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

God of glory, guide and empower all the regular folks of your church to trust your promises as Moses and Elijah did. Shine the light of Christ in our reflections and to the world. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of majesty, from the highest mountain to the lowest valley, your glory is reflected in your creation. Help us to protect and care for soil, air, water, and all the creatures you have made. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of hope and freedom, give just laws; fair leaders; sufficient food, water, and shelter; and abundant peace to all nations in poverty, strife, or at war (*especially*). Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of wholeness, bring clarity to those in confusing times, healing to those in painful times, and peace to those in trying times. We pray especially for Ann Ward, Jim Eastman, for Erin Zimmerman as her father is in palliative care, and for Reggie and George Dunst as they grieve his brother-in-law's death. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of new life, show us your will for the ministries in this place (*especially*), and transform us for mission and witness. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of glory, we give thanks for all the beloved who rest in your loving arms. Keep us from losing heart and strengthen our faith in your promise of everlasting life. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all of your beloved for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Holy God, mighty and immortal, you are beyond our knowing, yet we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ. Transform us into the likeness of your Son, who renewed our humanity so that we may share in his divinity, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

