

“Christmas on the Mountain”
+ Transfiguration C +
Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43
February 14, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

While the days are getting noticeably longer and the calendar tells us we’re only five weeks from Spring to look outside it seems as if we should be singing, “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.” In truth that is the best place to start with today’s Gospel – back at Christmas. While Christmas 2009 is a fading memory and the wreaths on people’s doors are only there because where do you put them? The Mount of Transfiguration is where the bundled babe of Bethlehem is finally unwrapped completely and we get an earth shattering, cosmos changing glimpse of just Who God sent to the world veiled in human flesh.

On the day that Luke tells us about in the Gospel, Peter, James and John witnessed EGENETO TO EIDOS TOU PROSOPOU AUTON HETERON - (literally “became the perception of Him different) – they witnessed a change that none of them could have either expected or imagined and that the best of adjectives is absolutely incapable of fully describing. Luke speaks of clothes of dazzling white, one of the other Gospel writers exclaimed in awe that, “no bleach could have gotten Jesus’ clothes so white.”

All of those are rather weak in describing the Word Made Flesh at whose arrival the earth must have trembled as it will not tremble until His return at the end of time, here, at last shown in His glory as God. Luke literally wrote that Jesus’ face and clothes suddenly flashed with something as bright as lightening, but even though we have all seen lightening just what would that look like?

Moses and Elijah, long dead and buried, were also standing there as large as life with Jesus, shining brighter than the sun. Luke says that Peter and his companions were “weighed down with sleep,” but they managed “to stay awake and watch.”

Was it the holiness of God that made their sin-marred selves weary? Were their minds numb and worn-out from seeing something beyond comprehension, description or anything George Lucas’ Industrial Light and Magic could concoct? What has this last Sunday of the Epiphany brought us to but our own gasping tiring confrontation with what it will take to overcome the sin that destroys us, consigns us to death, shatters our relationship, drags us to despair – such power, such might, such love is truly incomprehensible and indescribable. The 40 days of Lent beginning this Ash Wednesday are not nearly long enough to truly ponder what Peter, James and John witnessed.

How astounded they must have been to see Moses and Elijah, the superstars of Israel. They were the only two people in their history as God’s chosen nation to be invited up Mount Sinai for some “face time” with God. (Ex. 19:1-8, I Kings 18 and 19). Actually, God got the face

time, Moses was protected by the cloud that came between them and God placed Elijah in a cave for safety passing by while Elijah hid his eyes.

Now these luminaries stand in the presence of the Luminous One glowing with the glory of God, conversing with Jesus, as easily as you all talk with each other during coffee hour. Often I am asked what heaven will be like. If you want to get a little glimpse here it is: those who die in the faith are in the presence of God, they see God's glory, have been changed into God's likeness; have become like Jesus, as one day we who follow by the gift of faith today will be.

We are not told who passed this all on to Luke, but according to him, the three were talking about "(Jesus') departure which would be accomplished at Jerusalem." Wouldn't you love to have been a "fly-on-the-rock" for that conversation (though I get an unholy image of a bug and a bug-zapper)? What words do you think Moses and Elijah used to encourage Jesus knowing the path down from the mountain led to Jerusalem one last time for betrayal by a loved and trusted friend and the awful cruel and torturous death of crucifixion?

The little wrinkle behind this translation is the word used for "departure:" "EXODON," the Greek word for the "way out," the same word used for the "way out" of slavery – the Exodus when Israel was led from Egypt into the Promised land. An EXODON is an escape; an escape that Jesus was going to PLEYROUN, literally "make full." Put all that together and you get the three of them: Israel's greatest leader, Moses, and Israel's greatest prophet, Elijah, joined by Israel's greatest Messiah talking about the great escape Jesus was destined to finish in Jerusalem. The word Luke used even carries with it the idea of someone carrying out a command, a divine decree to make something happen.

The greatest escape Israel had ever known took them on dry land through the Red Sea, through 40 years of desert travel into the Promised Land where, despite having the Law, God's presence and miraculous provision and becoming a great nation Israel fell, again and again, into the ravages of sin: bad choices, idolatrous worship of things or feelings instead of turning in humility and gratefulness to the One True God and God's will and ways. Now, just in time, in the right time God sent Jesus – the eternally begotten Son - to finish the great escape God planned long before Jesus set foot on this earth.

Even though they had a front row seat, Peter, James and John wouldn't have put all that together. And knowing that it makes sense that Peter offered to build three tents up on that mountain in Lebanon, where they had just seen the most amazing and most confusing thing anyone on earth had ever witnessed. 25 years of writing Transfiguration sermons and I didn't get it till this one: In the Exodus, the children of Israel lived in tents. At home in the Promised Land, every year they lived in a tent for a week as a call to remembrance of where they had come from, where they were and who had brought them there. Even God "lived" in a tent; the "tent of meeting" it was called – the tabernacle that this very building is designed to represent. In that tabernacle tent and in its holy of holies, God promised to meet His people. In that tent, they came before God, protected from God's glory by a cloud of incense and the blood of their offerings.

Decades later when Solomon built a permanent Temple, it was a cloud of glory that filled the temple, that told Israel that God was in residence and they could always find the One True God there.

The Transfiguration of Jesus tells us that the “shekinah”/cloud of glory has moved – is no longer confined to tents and temples, but walking freely in flesh and blood among humankind. The shekinah was Jesus. Peter wanted to capture that. And wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you want to know that God was always in a place where He could be sought and found?

Well, God is. Not in the shiny paraments for this festival Sunday or the cloudy Minnesota skies shrouding us from the seldom-seen sun – no, God is alive and at work the Word that reveals Jesus to us as Savior and Lord – the very heart of God. God is present at the Table where we are our Lord’s guests, at the font where water and Word grant us adoption as heirs of heaven and the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts, enlighten us with God’s gifts, to plead for us in sighs to great for words when we cannot pray ourselves.

Those are the gifts that came to us at Christmas – the eternal gifts that will not fade. That is our treasure as we come down from the mount today having celebrated Christmas one more time on the way to Easter. This mount where God’s love and power are made known! Now we must make that love known, that power shared in word, in deed, in action – in humility – given as a gracious gift to others as it has been given to us.

Amen.

Now may our holy and immortal God, who has shown us His glory in the face of Jesus, the Christ, continue to transform us into the likeness of His Son who shared our humanity that we may share in His divinity.