

Exodus 24: 12-18
Psalm 2
2 Peter 1: 16-21
Matthew 17: 1-9

The Reverend Laura Palmer
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields
February 19th, 2023
Year A Transfiguration

Listen to Him

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

If you like a little razzle dazzle, the Transfiguration has it all. Mystery, awe, and wonder with waves of fear and trembling.

What's not to love about a mountain top moment? In today's readings, we have two dramatic moments where God speaks—not in the elegant poetry of Job-- but directly and to the point.

God tells Moses to come to the top of Mt. Sinai where he will receive what eventually will be known as the Ten Commandments. Finally, after six days obscured in a cloud, God appears on the seventh in “glory like a devouring fire.”

A thousand or so years later, Jesus invites Peter, James, and John to a mountain top as well. Not only do they see Jesus transformed and transfigured by megawatts of radiant light, but God again affirms Jesus as his beloved son in whom he is will pleased.”

Peter, hustler that he is, realizes he's on some pricey real estate, offers to build a few houses and plant his flag. The views, no doubt, were amazing.

It's easy to be captivated by these dramatic moments but, at least at first glance they leave us with an abracadabra God who isn't much help to those of us whose tents are pitched at the foot of the mountain, living in the mundane from day-to-day.

I had a mountaintop experience a decade or so ago when I climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro except that I started hallucinating a few thousand feet from the summit. The views were spectacular and while I wanted to push on for the photo

op because sometimes it is the destination, not the journey. I had just enough sanity left to start the long trek back down. That rarefied air was not for me.

But the Transfiguration offers more than a God who acts like the Wizard of Oz, parting clouds, creating fear, and lighting up his beloved son in pyrotechnics like a halftime show.

We Christians love and celebrate the light. The light of Christ, the star over the manger. After all, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

But today, the Feast of the Transfiguration, marks the end of Epiphany, the season of revelation and light and, in the liturgical year, we’re slouching into the looming shadows of Lent. Seeing it only as grim and severe to many misses the point about Lent and the power of the Transfiguration.

God works in darkness, appearing in those dark clouds of unknowing that engulf all of us sooner or later in our lives. Creation takes place in darkness. There are no bright lights in the womb where all of life begins. There’s no daylight in the dark and frozen earth the bulbs push every spring. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was written when he was blind. But most of us flee from darkness. It makes us afraid.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author reminds us that:

God dwells in deep darkens. The darkness that is not dark to God can be terrifying to those who like the deities well it. When we cannot see—when we are not sure where we are going and all our old landmarks have vanished inside the cloud—then plenty of us can believe we are lost when the exact opposite may be true. Based on the witness of those who have gone before, the dark cloud is where God takes people apart so they can be made new. It is the cloud of unknowing where nothing you thought you knew about God can prepare you to meet the God who is.¹

When Moses returns from the mountaintop after 40 days with the Ten Commandments, he has to cover himself because he’s aglow with a light that’s hard to behold. He has been transformed, transfigured.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, Time Magazine, Festival of Homiletics, 2014

How I wish I knew what Jesus was feeling in that moment when “his face shown like the sun” and his clothes were “dazzling white.” Did he want to stay remain on the mountain top, grab a bite with Moses and Elijah? We have no idea. Then God appears and again proclaims Jesus as his beloved son I whom he is well pleased and admonishes the disciples to “Listen to him.”

Terrified, Peter, James and John fall to the ground. Jesus touches them and says, “Get up. Be not afraid.” They four of them were alone. The theatrics were over and they headed down the mountain together. Jesus ordered them to tell no one what they had seen until after he had been raised from the dead.

Jesus came down from the mountain knowing it would not be for long. There was another mountain top waiting for him: Golgotha. Yet he chose to come down to be with us.

Peter, John, and James probably didn’t give that much thought. Who could believe what Jesus was saying was true? “Listen to him!” God said. What they were being asked to believe was preposterous. Who walks willing to their own execution? No one I know.

But this I do know. All of us will be crucified in our lives and often more than once. I doubt there is anyone in this congregation, myself included, who hasn’t endured – or may be enduring -- a time of unbearable agony when the dark cloud of unknowing descends over our lives.

Engulfed in the cloud, there is no way to believe that you’ll meet God there. But I did, and it changed everything about me and about my life, except I didn’t know it then. There were no theatrics and it didn’t happen overnight. Life, in fact, stayed very hard for a while longer. Yet the whisper of God persisted.

But I know this. I was not in it alone. Jesus came down from the mountain top to walk beside us. To touch us and say “Be not afraid.” Listen to him. AMEN

