

Transfiguration of the Lord

February 14, 2010 – Sarah Donnelly MDiv.

Texts: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2; Luke 9:28-43

Using resources developed by Kate Huey, Sermon Seeds

Exodus 34:29-35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Psalm 99

The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!

Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

Moses and Aaron were among his priests; Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them.

He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.

2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but



by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Luke 9:28-43

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.



I don't have a lot of memories when I think back to the years when I was very young. In fact, as my family despairingly reminds me on a regular basis, I don't have accurate memories of many things that happened when we were growing up. But when I think of my time in kindergarten, one memory does surface: all the children sitting in a circle looking at our beloved teacher, and singing:

"Good Morning to you. Good morning to you?  
We're all in our places, with sun shiny faces  
And this is the way we start a new day."

Did any of you have to sing that song as you were growing up or was this a song unique to children being raised in southern Ontario in the 1970's? It is certainly an instructive song, isn't it? This song told us that a new day begins when we are "all in our places, with sun shiny faces." This song told us about who needs to show up, what we should be doing once we have shown up, and the preferred attitude and disposition we were supposed to embrace. Kind of complicated for 5 year olds when you think about it, but we got it, and I think that song did set the tone for the few hours we were about to spend together.

Our first reading today talks about someone whose face was transformed not by expectation or invitation, but by an encounter with God. This transformation was so startling, so striking, that it scared the people Moses was attempting to lead. His appearance - his sun shining face - unsettled them, to the point that Moses had to place a veil over his face in order to be able to talk with them, and then take that veil off when he re-entered the presence of the Divine – into the presence of passionate love.

It is a wonderful story, and like all good stories, it is true on so many levels. Think back to a time when you happened to glimpse the passionate gaze of a couple who are just starting to fall in love. Hollywood strives to capture this on film, but nothing can beat the real thing – the raw energy and sensuality that can crackle between two people. They can't look at anyone but each other, and when we glimpse this



sort of passion in a couple, this sort of energy, we often avert our eyes too. This sort of presence, passion, energy has consumed them – they are changed, transformed by their experience, and we find ourselves tiptoeing around them, keeping our eyes averted, placing a veil over our eyes so to speak, waiting for that passionate energy to subside a little, waiting for the time when good sense and cooler heads can once again emerge.

Perhaps you have experienced this sort of passion in your own life; perhaps you have witnessed it in the life of another couple. I have experienced both – recently in watching dear friends of ours – Melissa and Daniel who worship at the 9:15 service here - fall in love, and when I was falling in love with Scott 8 years ago. I was so concerned about the energy that was coursing through my body, the bouts of dizziness, that I even went to see my family doctor! After a quick examination of my blood pressure and asking me what was happening in my life, he gave a deep, loud laugh and said, “Sarah – you are fine – you are just falling in love!” However we have encountered it, we know this energy of love, wonder, intimacy, and the thirst for knowing more about our beloved is a powerful, consuming force. Those in it are transformed by this sort of power, and those watching it are careful where we place our gaze, conscious that we are standing on “holy ground.” And that is one insight contained in this story from the book of Exodus – that God is not a tame, manageable, polite sort of presence, comfortable at high teas served at the Empress or our Great Aunt’s Sunday dinners, with starched napkins and hushed voices, but a wild energy, a passionate presence, an encounter with a love and energy that transforms, consumes, transfigures us, so that we emerge from these rare but powerful experiences changed, glowing – perhaps even radiating – with an inner peace, confidence, assurance, direction and hope that can only come from God.

The disciples Peter, James and John were not expecting to encounter this sort of raw energy – this sort of life-changing drama – when they accepted the invitation of Jesus to join him in prayer on top of a mountain. In fact, after listening to what Jesus had just been telling them, they were probably only feeling confused, and more than a little troubled. Maybe, they thought, if they prayed, they could forget about what Jesus had just been sharing with them. Earlier in chapter 9 of Luke’s gospel Jesus had asked them, “Who do you say I am?” and Peter had scored big points by saying, “You are the Messiah of God.” But in this gospel there are no affirming words for Peter. Instead Jesus practically hushes him up and tells them all not to share this information with anyone, because things are going to get very difficult, very soon, and not just for him but for his followers also. He says he’s going to suffer and die and on the third day be raised again. And anyone who wants to be his follower, he says, has to be willing to lay down their own life, too. Peter and the others are not too keen to hear about all of this suffering and death; after all, they’re understandably hoping for deliverance from their enemies, their oppressors, the Roman Empire. They’re longing for the taste of victory and the liberation that would result if they could triumph over the despised Romans and all they represent. Death and suffering were not what they had in mind; a little glory sounded much better.

And it is right after this difficult conversation that Jesus goes up the mountain with his three friends to pray, and that where today’s gospel begins. Today, Peter, James and John actually get a taste of glory, like Moses up on top of the mountain, seeing divine light and energy and hearing God’s voice affirm the identity of Jesus. This morning, when you heard the Lay Assistant in reading the gospel proclaim that the divine voice spoke, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” what did you think of? His baptism? Yes – this is a story about God once again identifying Jesus, blessing him, but also instructing us: “listen to



him." Peter, James and John get to have one of those ecstatic visions that might have transformed their lives then and there, except, the text says, they weren't sure what to do with it. Sleep-deprived Peter practically babbled, "not knowing what he said" (9:33), offering to get busy putting up tents so that they could preserve the experience. We're sure that he was, of course, only trying to be helpful. Those of us who think that every situation requires us to DO something, however well-intentioned our efforts, get a reminder here that sometimes all we need to do in these rare but life changing moments is simply be still and listen. When we hear the voice of God saying, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him," we can practically imagine God's annoyance that Peter didn't have sense enough to remain silent at such a moment. If Moses was told up on a mountain centuries earlier that he couldn't see God and live, perhaps Peter should have been told that he couldn't see God and talk so much. One scripture scholar writes, "All that is missing is the cosmic hand, reaching down to give Peter a good 'you-are-missing-the-point' slap upside the head." One might imagine God's annoyance that Peter didn't have sense enough to remain silent at such a moment.

As usual, however, Peter is just like us. We often try to talk our way into understanding, try to process an experience so that we can absorb its meaning and make that meaning part of who we are. Or maybe we do what so many believers have done with a deeply spiritual experience: we try to carve it in stone, build tents, make rules, harden our traditions and say, "We've always believed this way, done it this way, worshipped this way, said it this way..." We take the experience and make it something we can hold onto, something that won't change, and best of all, something that won't change us, either.

Have you experienced the Divine in a way that has transfigured – that has transformed – your life? Now some of you might be able to immediately say yes to this question, but before some of you rush to say "no," think about it. Has your life been touched by love, or passion, or forgiveness, or grace, or grief, or some other powerful force, in such a way that you have emerged from those experiences a changed person? Scott has often preached about our rare experiences of being in "thin places" – be they holy, special geographical locations in our world, or the experience of sitting by the bedside of someone who is dying, or being in a room when someone has just been born. Thin places instinctively remind us that we are on holy ground, that the Divine is gently swirling around us, and that all we can do in such precious moments is look – and listen – and be silent – and pay attention with every fibre of our being.

What is the invitation to transfiguration that we hear today? I believe author Marianne Williamson has captured this divine invitation in the following words:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."





This is our invitation today – this is what we hear in our mountaintop moments, when we are able to glimpse divine beauty, hear divine music, or taste divine sweetness. This encounter with the divine can happen on windswept beaches, as we walk through old growth forests, tread carefully on the holy ground of “thin places,” and as we offer – and with deep gratitude receive – true forgiveness. We are swept up in the divine when we fall in love. We are embraced by the divine when a child welcomes our hugs and kisses. But these experiences of love are not meant to be enshrined or captured in chocolates and roses and valentines (however good these are) – we are transformed when we allow them to change us, so that we can continue to grow into the person that God only dreams we might become. Transfiguration does not shield us from suffering – the road to Jerusalem lies ahead of us. But these transfiguration moments remind us about who we are and whose we are.

The Lord bless you and keep you:

May the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you:

May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.

The Aaronic Blessing. Numbers 6: 24-26

