

Transfiguration of our Lord February 27 2022

Luke 9:28-36

Eight days before the events of our reading this morning Jesus and the disciples were praying. During this time of prayer Jesus asked them who the crowds said that he was. Their reply echoes the other synoptic gospels (Matthew and Mark), that the crowds say Jesus is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets. When Jesus asks who the disciples say that he is, Peter responds, "The Messiah of God."

Jesus quickly tells them not to tell anyone about this belief and then predicts what will happen to him- undergoing great suffering, being rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. Killed. And on the third day, the first day of the week, Sunday, be raised.

Then Jesus begins to describe what those who wish to follow him are choosing. To follow Jesus is to make a daily decision to deny themselves, take up their cross- their willingness to lose everything up to and including their life- and follow after Jesus.

Eight days after this event, Jesus takes his inner circle of disciples; Peter, James, John, and goes up a mountain to pray. To pray, an activity mentioned more in the Gospel of Luke than in any other gospel. While Jesus is praying the three disciples notice his appearance changes, his clothes become dazzling white, they see two men talking with Jesus, Moses – who freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, through whom God gave the Ten Commandments, who led the Israelites through the wilderness journey of 40 years to the promised land. And Elijah- prophet of

God, speaker of truth to power even when threatened with death, the one whom Jews believe will come again into the world to make way for the Messiah of God.

How stunned must Peter, James and John have been by this vision- come upon them in their shared time of prayer with Jesus? It is shocking enough that Peter falls back on his faith upbringing, he wants to preserve this encounter, to commemorate it- "let us build three dwellings, tents, monuments... one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." He's basically just babbling.

But the moment is not yet over, they are then overshadowed by a cloud, and hear the voice of God speaking of Jesus, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" Then silence, and only Jesus standing there. Stunned, they say nothing to anyone until much. much later.

As we ponder this amazing story ourselves it is good to remember some things. We remember that within the Hebrew tradition, mountains are holy places. Literally closer to God, and it is often on mountains that significant encounters with God occur. Like this occasion.

Moses goes up a mountain to commune with God on several occasions. It is on the mountain he receives the Ten Commandments- this basic guide for how the faithful should relate to God and to other human beings. Later, on the mountain, as we hear in our first reading this morning, Moses asks to see this God who has brought them out of the land of Egypt. God responds that no one can see the full presence of God and live. Instead, God says, hide in this cleft in the rock and when I pass by you see my backside. Even this is so transformative that Moses is forever changed by it. The skin of his face shone. Moses' encounter with the divine is visible to those who are around him.

Elijah, prophet of God, fresh from a great victory over the pagan priests, must leave the country or be hunted down by the authorities. He travels into the wilderness to that same mountain of Moses. Here he is told God will pass by. Elijah stands on the mountain in the face of a windstorm so strong it breaks the rocks, an earthquake that shatters the land around him, a fire that rages across the landscape, but God is not in any of them. It is in the sound of sheer silence that follows all this sound and fury that Elijah has his own mountain top encounter with God, that he hears the voice of the Lord.

Now, Jesus and Peter, James, and John have their own mountain top encounter with the divine.

How many of you feel like Peter this morning? Weighed down by sleep, but awake, nonetheless. Staring at the glory of Jesus talking to two long dead prophets, listening to this sermon and not knowing quite what to make of it.

I wonder, if what we can best learn this morning from our faith ancestors, Peter, James and John, is that faith is not head knowledge. It is not doing anything, other than following the one who is the embodiment of God's love for us. Jesus. Faith is not about perfection, but perhaps it is more about persistence or even proximity. It is about hanging out with Jesus and others who follow him. It is about being in place to see and hear what Jesus says and does and maybe getting about half of that and probably getting that half wrong.

Being a follower of Jesus is about just that, following Jesus. A daily choosing to make being in his presence, the most important thing in our lives. Because It ain't about what we do, but about what Jesus has done. And just being the presence of that.

It is about pooling our ignorance and our intelligence and together beginning to figure out, over time, what this might mean. What we have seen in our encounters with God might mean. What Jesus has said might mean. What Jesus has done might mean. For us.

Why are you here today? What pulled you out of bed, across the Iowa winter landscape and into this place? What made you spin up your computer and peek in on this assembly?

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we believe that in our assembly, we practice the very thing we are called to be, the body of Christ. We practice being in relationship with one another, learning who we each are- what has gone on with us this week, our life story. So that we know over time the story of Sue's dedication to her son and this congregation. To have the privilege of seeing Dennis grow from a boy, to a young man, to a father himself.

We practice being honest about our own sin, the places where we have crossed God's boundaries and hurt our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. We practice forgiving others where they have sinned against us, hurt us. Wounded us.

We assemble to pray. As Jesus so often did, trusting that we will encounter God in this prayer. We come to encounter God's Word in our reading, hearing, singing, speaking. To have our own mountain top experience. We come to follow Jesus' command that we would eat this Meal of communion, in remembrance of him and all that he has suffered and done for us, and be strengthened for the journey as we continue to follow him.

We assemble together, because this is what Jesus did, he called his disciples around him. Because where two or three of his disciples are gathered Jesus and the Holy Spirit are there. Because if no where else in our lives, we can be confident that God is present here. Now, in this Word we hear, in this Meal we eat, in the song we raise and the words we speak. Because God has promised it is so.

We come, because we are followers of Jesus, and this is where we know he is. We might not always get what is going on. We might not know what to say at any given moment. We will understand imperfectly. But we persist in being in his presence, because that is faith.

And it doesn't stop here, does it? Jesus is never nailed down to one place. He resists it, even. He is always moving to the next town, the next village, because that is what he came out to do, to proclaim release to the captives, to bring healing to the broken, to bring peace into conflict, to speak truth in the face of the Prince of Lies.

You want to follow me, Jesus says. Then deny yourself, take up your willingness to lose it all for my sake, and follow me. Come on along, gang. Go where I go. Speak what I speak. Do what I do.

This morning that means we pray for the people of Ukraine and of Russia. We pray for peace and the laying down of weapons. We pray for those who fear for tomorrow, that the Holy Spirit would draw near to comfort them. We pray for those wounded in body and spirit, those killed by the violence. We pray for those with power over war or peace, for wisdom, compassion, and discernment to guide their decisions. We pray for all those precious ones created in the image of

God, at risk and in fear, that God would hold and protect them. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah, God's Chosen One.

The one who, beginning on this Ash Wednesday we will follow as he journeys to Jerusalem and his own encounter with the madness of brutality and violence that can too often overtake us as human beings. As he responds to that violence not in kind, with drawn swords and uprisings, but with a prayer of compassion-
"Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing."

This is the one who we gather this morning to follow, who has already gone ahead of us into this world that can seem so full of hatred, violence, and pain. The one who calls us to follow behind him. Not to perfection or even just getting it right. But to follow along, to at least live life in the presence of Jesus. And perhaps, something will rub off on us along the way.

We sing our alleluia's this day even though there is the madness of war raging, children of God killing one another. We sing our alleluia's because we follow the one who was killed by human violence and who proved that God is more powerful than all of that. Who on this day, three days after being slaughtered on the cross, was raised into new life. And it is in this hope and in this promise of resurrection and new life that Christ embodies that we live our lives.

We sing our alleluia's today, knowing that we will put them away for a time soon. Appropriate perhaps, in a world that once again sees war raging. But knowing also that at the end of this time, the alleluia's will return. Because we know this truth that was expressed by the late Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Goodness is stronger than evil;

Love is stronger than hate;

Light is stronger than darkness;

Life is stronger than death;

Victory is ours through Him who loves us.

Jesus Christ, who we follow, who is risen today.

Alleluia.