

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Epiphany
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Holy Nativity, Plano
22 February, 2009

Moses went up the mountain to receive the law. And God met him there. God gave him the law, and the presence of the Lord made Moses' face shine with the light of the Lord's reflected glory. But the glory did not come from Moses. It was God's glory. Moses put a veil over his face, so that the people couldn't see the reflected glory fading between meetings with God. Moses' death was witnessed by no one but God himself.

Elijah also went up the same mountain to meet with God. And when God met with him there, Elijah covered his face with his mantle. The act is not explained, but it would seem that the prophet is refusing to claim for himself the right to speak with God "face to face", as Moses did. Even so, God took him up bodily into heaven.

So here we have two men who were called by God to be instruments of his revelation. Moses represents the Law, and Elijah represents the later prophets sent to uphold it. Both of them went up the mountain to meet God. And both are understood to be with God, since neither of them was seen to die.

And now God himself, having become a man, ascends a mountain to talk to his Father in heaven. And this time there is a role reversal. Instead of ascending, Moses and Elijah *descend* to meet with God on the mountain. They have been in the presence of God in heaven, and they are full of the reflected glory of that presence. But he to whom the Law and the prophets pointed is present. And he is revealed in his true identity as the one whose natural state is glory.

Jesus' face changes, and "intensely white" doesn't begin to cover it. Everything upon his person becomes so bright that it's flashing like white lightning. Moses and Elijah "appear in glory", but Jesus simply appears for once as what and who he is. He does not reflect anyone else's glory. The glory that is in him is simply allowed to be visible.

And how do we know that this happened? Because there were three witnesses to the event: Peter, James, and John. Two of them lived long enough to write about it. St. John writes, "we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." And St. Peter says, "we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." They recall the brightness and the voice from the cloud, "This is my Son ... listen to him." Even though the story is not complementary to himself, Peter continues to report it. It's a revelation that is inescapable. It changed his perspective. It changed his entire life.

Unfortunately, most people seem to be in the habit of treating the Bible as a collection of “meaningful” stories. We come at our bible piecemeal, if at all. We remember the highlights from Sunday School. We attend to Jesus as if he were Peter Pan, or some other fictional character that comes complete with all kinds of miracles and marvels. And certainly none of this is going to change our lives or our behavior. It’s all very well to teach the truth through stories about fairies, but going around talking to fairies is just plain nuts.

The church today is full of such thinking. There will be plenty of sermons today on the *symbolism* of the transfiguration. Many will treat it as a story from which to glean certain lessons, some of them conflicting. And many will treat it that way, not because they see it as rich in meaning, but because they see it as devoid of fact.

But here is St. Peter, insisting on just such facts. “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Hey y’all, we didn’t make any of this up! It’s not just a story. It really happened. All that stuff in the Law and the prophets pointed to Jesus. And we know, because we saw it.

This is one of the signatures of Christian faith. It is based on eyewitness accounts. And there doesn’t seem to be any reason for the eyewitnesses to lie. At the time they gave their testimony, they were being persecuted for it. St. Peter himself was executed shortly after writing this passage. And we can be sure it was for the crime of professing exclusive faith in Jesus Christ.

The Transfiguration is a handhold for us in the dark. We will do well, St. Peter tells us, to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place. We are not simply interpreting the scriptures as we please, nor were the Apostles. God made it abundantly clear to them what he was doing, even if it took them a while to pay proper attention. No matter what the culture around us may say, no matter what we are told by false preachers, the teaching of the Apostles comes with abundant evidence. We are not required to make a “leap of faith”.

What is required of us, however, is to live in accordance with the truth that we have. We are not allowed to interpret scripture all on our own. Neither are we allowed to ignore it, because it is the Holy Spirit speaking through men. We know that the same Holy Spirit is active in us with divine power. So there is no excuse not to grow in holiness ourselves.

Living in the light of the Transfiguration will mean seeking holiness in our relationships. It will mean not exploiting the people in our lives but serving them instead. It will mean learning self-control, and kindness. It will mean loving people, even when we do not like them. It will mean repenting and seeking forgiveness when we hurt someone else, starting with our families at home.

Living in the light of the Transfiguration will mean seeking holiness in our parish. It will mean looking at this institution not as a purveyor of social services, but as a living monument to the good news of Jesus Christ and his Lordship over our lives. It will mean directing our resources toward our Lord's will. It will mean spending our energy on making sure people have heard the good news and had a chance to respond to it. It will mean putting our money where our mouths are and making sure that there are resources of time, energy, and funds to do the will of God for this community.

These are the kind of things I expect to happen in a parish which is living out the conviction St. Peter is at pains to give us. And it turns out that transfiguration actually is an apt symbol for what is happening to us. Jesus' transfiguration does prefigure ours, but only because of the power that is unveiled, that is then set to work through Christ's atonement and resurrection. We will be changed into his likeness, because he makes it possible, if we are faithful.