

Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
“TRANSFIGURATION”  
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Epworth Chapel on the Green  
*Exodus 34:28-35*  
*2 Peter 1:13-21*

February 22, 2009  
*Psalm 99*  
*Mark 9:2-10*

Could we just jump right in and start with Peter? I simply cannot read this account without a smirk on my face. It is a most sacred text that recounts this holy moment of Jesus revelation as God’s beloved Son, and yet I feel the need to chuckle. Because there on the holy mountain with Jesus, Moses and Elijah . . . is Peter—verbally impulsive Peter. While James and John are scared speechless, Peter opens his mouth and just blurts something out. It’s not like he has something wise to add; he simply cannot seem to hold his tongue.

And this is not the first time that his words run out ahead of him. In fact, just a few verses earlier in Mark’s gospel, we find his verbal impulsivity putting him in the path of Jesus’ harsh rebuke. Jesus had begun to tell the disciples about what was to come: that he would suffer much and be rejected by the religious leaders, and that he would in fact be killed and then rise again in three days (8:31). Peter was clearly uncomfortable with such a plan and he pulled Jesus aside and tried to correct him. Can you imagine it? *Peter rebuked Jesus!* It was in response to Peter’s misplaced words of correction that Jesus spoke “Get away from me, Satan!”

And while Jesus condemns Peter’s words, He yet invites Peter, along with James and John, on a private excursion up the mountain for a sacred encounter with God.

The scene of the transfiguration boggles the imagination. Jesus is illuminated with the glory of God. His clothes are radiant white. His face, nearly glowing. How startling for the disciples! How do they know *what* they are witnessing? And, as if the transfigured Jesus is not astonishment enough, they are joined on the mountain by Moses and Elijah.

In the awesomeness of the moment, Peter simply cannot contain himself. He blurts out, “Lord, this is great! Let’s put up three shelters here: one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” And the gospel writer is careful to remark that: “(Peter) said this because he didn’t really know what else to say . . .”

Peter is just so gung-ho and enthusiastic. His skin, and surely his lips, can hardly contain him. He wants to stop the hands of time and make the moment last forever. Constructing some sort of protective shelters would allow the three men of God to be safe from the elements of nature on the mountain top, and would allow the disciples to prolong their sacred encounter.

And, really, who could blame him? Peter the fisherman was having a private rendezvous with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah! Foolish or not, I find myself sort of proud of Peter for attempting something to seize the moment, “Let’s build three tents!” he suggests.

While it is easy to criticize the imprudence of Peter’s suggestion with our 20/20 hindsight, perhaps we might also recognize in his suggestion the same desire that we all share: a longing to experience true glory.

Let’s wander backward in time a bit to the time of Moses. Our Old Testament lesson recalls a similar radiance apparent on Moses after having encountered God on Mt. Sinai. In fact, Moses’ skin was so illuminated from the glory of God, he had to veil his face from the people so it would not hurt their eyes. The only time Moses would unveil his face is when he was giving the instructions of the Lord to the people, or when he was meeting with the Lord in the Tent of Meeting.

Exodus 33:8-11 explains that

*“It was Moses’ custom to set up the tent known as the Tent of Meeting far outside the camp. Everyone who wanted to consult with the LORD would go there.*

*8 Whenever Moses went out to the Tent of Meeting, all the people would get up and stand in their tent entrances. They would all watch Moses until he disappeared inside. 9 As he went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and hover at the entrance while the LORD spoke with Moses. 10 Then all the people would stand and bow low at their tent entrances. 11 Inside the Tent of Meeting, the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. Afterward Moses would return to the camp . . .”*

Moses was the representative for the people who would enter the tent and offer the needs of the people to the Lord. And the people watched and waited prayerfully while Moses interceded on their behalf. The people did not hear directly from the Lord; they heard from Moses, God’s messenger. They could see from looking at Moses that he had been with God, and they relied on him to represent them before God.

Perhaps it was this mindset that had Peter so excited about encountering Moses and Elijah with the transfigured Jesus on the mountain. Surely there and then he might have access to God through the mediation of these messengers of God. As long as these prophets were there in his company, he could bend their ear to speak to God on his behalf; he could *attempt* to keep quiet and listen to how they might reveal a message from God. *Build tents for them! Let them stay here! Let us be together that I might taste and experience the glory of God through these three men of God!*

But what had been started with Moses and the prophets was coming to its true fulfillment in Jesus Christ. God indeed intended self-revelation and invitation to relationship with God’s people. With Moses, God was able to reveal God’s self in the law—words written by God’s own hand in tablets of stone. And God spoke to the people through Moses in the Tent of Meeting. Wherever they went, the tent went with them. And no matter where they were on their wandering journey, the presence of God went with them. With the aid of the tented tabernacle, they could meet with God anywhere, even in the wilderness. God spoke face-to-face, and through Moses to the people.

But in Jesus, God became accessible to all people everywhere by means of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Israelites of old, Peter did not have to wait to hear from Moses what God would say on the mountain top; Peter heard it with his own ears: “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”

There was no need for tents. Because of Jesus, Peter was being brought into the presence of God directly.

Perhaps I find so much delight in Peter’s response because I can identify with him. I am afraid that I am far more likely to say too much . . . or to speak before I think . . . than I am to hold my tongue and be reflective. And while Moses is . . . well, he is MOSES! and Elijah is Elijah . . . Peter is an ordinary guy with an ordinary life who was encountered by the Son of God and invited to follow. Peter could be me . . . or you.

And while I want to take care to affirm the particularity of this event in a unique place and time in history, it is yet representative of the reality of our own lives.

There on the mountain top is Jesus with Moses and Elijah . . . and Peter! And opening wide the expanse between heaven and earth is the self-revealing voice of God speaking so our ears can also hear: “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.”

We want the very thing that Peter wanted: we long to dwell in the presence of God and to see God’s glory revealed. We desire to know and be known by God, though the prospect is terrifying in every way. We are convinced that it is no longer enough to merely board our ordinary fishing vessel day after monotonous day. We have heard the Beloved Son of God inviting us to come and follow him. And we long to do just that.

So, in the days and weeks that are before us in Lent, we will deny ourselves and follow the Christ through the wilderness on a treacherous pathway to the cross. In the long desert of our journey, we will hear other voices tempting us to chart our own path or glorify ourselves. But the Holy-Other one, the Glorious Father has spoken so that *our ears* could hear. And though the light of Christ shines on the sin-sickness of our fallen condition, it also sheds abroad its healing rays.

While we descend with Christ from the glory of Epiphany to the desert of Lent, God does not remain aloof in some remote Temple on top of a high mountain. Moses' tent of meeting as a symbol reminds us that the Holy, Righteous God, full of Glory journeys with the people and meets with us even in the wilderness. God in Christ has come very near to us.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, we come with our eyes unveiled that we might see the immeasurable glory of the Lord revealed to us. We come asking for sustaining nourishment for the journey that is before us. We come near to God, the Holy Other One, because God has drawn near to us in the Beloved Son.