

The Face of Light, Exodus 34:29-35 & Luke 9:28-43, 3/3/19, NM

Beginning

Today marks a very important time in our church year. It's the last Sunday after Epiphany and the Sunday before Lent. Just to remind you, Epiphany celebrates two events. The first is the Visit of The Magi - the wise men from the East who went to Palestine in search of the Child who would be King - Jesus of Nazareth. They didn't know it was specifically Jesus they were looking for. They had seen the rising of a new star in the West and believed that if they followed it they would find The Messiah. Which they did.

As you likely know, the word epiphany means a sudden overwhelming insight. The kind of insight that can cause you to leave hearth and home for parts unknown, in search of a child whose family you cannot name - because you think he just might be able to save the world from itself! Fortunately for the wise men, their epiphany turned out to be true - they actually managed to find Jesus and lay gifts at the foot of the manger in which he lay.

The other event that's often associated with Epiphany is the one that we heard described in the NT reading today. It's called The Transfiguration, and it's one of the most striking miracle stories in The Bible, because it doesn't involve a healing or a feeding of many, or any other action. What it recounts is a miraculous event that stands alone as an example of Jesus' apparent ability to manipulate reality.

The story is simple. One day Jesus went out to pray and took with him Peter, John and James. When they arrived at a suitable spot Jesus began to pray, and as he prayed something extraordinary happened - his face began to glow. Then - suddenly - the disciples realized that Jesus was not alone. With him were two of the greatest OT miracle workers - Moses and Elijah. They too were shining, in fact all three had in effect become figures of pure light.

The text says - *Just as they were leaving him...* - which I took to mean that Moses and Elijah had finished their conversation and were disappearing again - Peter spoke up and said, *Wouldn't it be great if we built three shrines here, one for each of you, so people could come and see you and give you honor. Imagine how uplifting that would be!*

But Jesus didn't go for that proposal. He was never interested in being worshipped or adored. And though his answer isn't recorded we can guess what it was from what he did next, which was nothing. For just at that moment, some clouds passed overhead, and from the clouds there issued a voice which said, *This is my son The Chosen, Listen to him.* When the disciples recovered Jesus was before them as he had always been. They all walked back to where the others were waiting and no more was said about the experience until after Jesus was killed.

That experience was remarkable in and of itself, but when we place it next to the OT reading for today, which talks about Moses and the way his face shone after he had spent many days talking to God, we cannot help being stuck by the similarities. A human being who is allowed to communicate with God is transformed by that experience. For Moses the transformation was permanently visible to everyone. Can you imagine what it would mean if you met someone now whose face was so brightly lit from within that he or she had to wear a veil so people would be able to tolerate his or her presence? And if you had known that person for some time and you knew that he or she had once been normal. Would you believe that person had spoken to God?

Middle

The things we read in scripture are important in themselves because of what they tell us about our tradition and the way it has unfolded over thousands of years. But more important still are the things that scripture teaches us about how to live our lives faithfully. It's not always easy to know what to do from day to day. We all live with problems that aren't easily resolved. We also live with mistakes and

regrets that can feel overwhelming sometimes. I was talking to a friend the other day and I started out by saying, *How's it going, man?* The way we all do. And he said, *Fine, good, I'm OK...well...I do sometimes feel like a slowdown would be alright. You know just a pause... it's always like something's coming at you, before you can even deal with the last thing.* Of course I knew exactly what he meant. There is flat out always something that requires coping with. Some challenge or demand for action. You just feel like, *Goddamn, can't it just stop for a minute? I'm just so damn tired, I feel like I can hardly catch my breath and here comes another hard thing to deal with.* I mean you could just weep, right? Break right down and cry because nobody is going to help you. You're on your own. Mom and Dad are gone - either literally or figuratively - and your friends are having their own struggles.

I think Jesus of Nazareth knew all about those feelings. Knows all about how it feels when you have an epiphany that tells you there isn't one single thing you can do that's going to make the slightest difference to anything. Life is ridiculous. You wake up one day and you don't know where you are who you are why you are or what's going to happen next. You slowly gain the self awareness, size, strength, intelligence and resilience you need to be an independent person in the world. Slowly you come to the realization that no one really knows what this life business is about. Plenty of people have opinions and ideas, but that's not the same thing. Nevertheless, humans are hardwired to ask questions and try to have their questions answered, so that's what we do.

Then there's something else about we humans - we always seem to be looking for someone to tell us the answers to the big questions. A super person who will tell us what to think and what to believe and what to do. That might be one reason so many of us get bitter. You see, no one really knows the answers so it's more or less inevitable that whoever we decide to follow will eventually let us down.

One place you can see that play out is during presidential elections. Everyone is looking for The Perfect Candidate. The man or woman capable of solving every problem that faces us. Within four years with time off for campaigning and

family. It doesn't matter that the assignment is clearly impossible to achieve. Every time, again and again that's what we long for and that's what we seek. And when whoever gets elected disappoints us we punish him or her in the midterm elections. And because organized religion has taken a hit the past few decades, the electoral process has taken on a messianic flavor that is taking us in some very strange and dangerous directions.

Some of us make family the focus of our lives and our quest for meaning. It seems logical. Family combines intimacy, symbolism, overwhelming emotion, and physical challenge. But it's a risky thing to do. Families are fragile in all kinds of ways, and staking everything on the proposition that raising a family is our ultimate purpose can lead us astray. For if the family proves to be a false hope because of infidelity, loss of affection, accidental death or injury, or something completely unforeseen - bitterness can overtake us and the road back from that is long and hard.

Creativity is a great builder of self-esteem. But most of us aren't blessed with creative skills, nor is our work a source of inspiration. So at the end of the day the search for meaning is often frustrating and prone to failure. Even people who are blessed to have known success in their professional lives, find themselves faced with the knowledge that it is still not enough to satisfy the need to understand life's purpose and meaning. Moreover, many people who look to church and religion to provide an ultimate purpose, wind up disappointed to discover just how limited church can be when it comes to life's secrets. Too many churches are content to provide excitement and emotional release, or comfort - instead of epiphany, redemption, salvation and revelation.

End

That's where Jesus begins. At the moment of resignation when we have tried everything we can think of, and have arrived we know not where. When we get to what seems like the end of the journey, and have not found what we sought.

That's when I met Jesus on my own journey. Most of you know that I'm a 12-Stepper. An alcoholic who was saved from destruction and despair by God's Grace alone. Nothing I had tried to do for myself had worked and I was left in a place that felt like I was looking up at the world from the bottom of a well. I could see a tiny circle of light way up above me, but getting to it was clearly impossible.

I don't want to imply that I hadn't found anything spiritual before that. Because I found a lot of good things out there. Some that have continued to serve me. The study of other cultures was wonderful and I remain convinced that all of us need to be exposed to cultures other than our own. Anthropology has been an academic discipline for over a hundred years and has made huge progress in the quest to understand what cultural differences are important and why human beings are essentially the same. I still use my anthropology all the time - especially ministering a congregation in Queens - the most culturally diverse place in the world.

But anthropology does not offer salvation. Nor does any other academic discipline. And to be fair, it's not their function. Academic knowledge is a good thing - a critically important thing - pushing the ball a little further up the slope. I wanted more.

Over the years, I met people who practiced spirituality associated with other religious traditions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and others. Without question there is great truth in many of them.

But for me there was always the sneaking feeling that I already knew as much as those doing the teaching. And never did I find someone I wanted to follow. Until I met Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus revealed to me the possible. Led me through ways of coping with the challenge of each day. Held my hand when I was in danger without promising safety. Allowed me to see the Miracle at the center of all things. Showed me, more clearly than anyone else had ever done that God is real and with us. One of

the things we get from the text about Moses is that a lot of people run away from too much God. Just as the Israelites could not long look upon Moses' face after he had spoken to God. His light shone too brightly. It revealed too much. In the same way we aren't always prepared for what Jesus has to show us. It can be comforting, of course it can. But it can also be hard to face for it often makes demands on us.

There is a thought I want to leave you with today. If you have ever doubted the accounts of the miraculous remember - we may not live to see Christ's face, but we can find miraculous, light-filled faces in many places - often places we do not expect. One of Jesus' most important truths was compassion for others. He told us that what we must do is love one another. All the rest of it flows from that. The spiritual hunger we all feel is fed with love.

Many years ago I worked for Covenant House NY, which is a shelter for homeless and runaway youths. It was an altogether remarkable place. It was physically attractive and welcoming and every need was provided for at no cost, and no one was ever turned away - even if it meant putting mattresses in the offices. It was founded and at that time headed by a priest, Father Bruce Ritter. Father Ritter said something that became an aphorism there and I've never forgotten it. It was this - *Sometimes God has a kid's face*. Even and especially when the kid has been brutalized and abused. When you can look without fear or bias you will understand that God is right there in front of you. Those kids just might be the light-filled prophets of the twenty-first century. For the way we respond to their need tells us what the stakes are. If we cannot be compassionate and meet their despair with love - we are surely lost as a society, and as individuals.

Salvation and redemption are there for the asking. But there is a price and it is purity of heart. Every human life is precious in God's Eyes.

And all God's People did say...Amen!