

Last Sunday after Epiphany

Transfiguration Sunday

February 19, 2012

It was a couple of weeks ago. Our EFM group was meeting on a Tuesday evening a little after 6 pm. People seemed to be distracted. A couple of folks popped up and started fooling with the blinds. Others were making comments. I was not really aware of what was going on. And then some of the people there got my attention—"Look! Look at the sunset." And I finally did. Once I looked, I became like everyone else, preoccupied with what I was seeing. The sky was filled with brilliant colors, especially stripes of purple across the horizon. As I read once somewhere, it was like the sky had been cut open and was bleeding. It only lasted for a few minutes, and then it was dusk. Something so memorable and yet it only lasted moments.

Most of us have had similar experiences in nature, probably many more than one if we have paid attention. A sunset, a rainbow, lightening... the list goes on. Moments when we see; moments that take our breath away. The times when we can say with the psalmist, "The heavens declare the glory of God."

We see it not only in the heavens but here on earth. The soon coming spring will point to the glory we see on the ground around us, too. Like the poet wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning

People throughout history-- and probably even some of us here this morning—have had other experiences that we can't explain as easily. It is more than our response to the beauty of nature. In other centuries, the experiences may have been proclaimed and even become part of our Scripture and tradition. For us today, we may share them shyly to a priest or a friend or a therapist. It may be a vision, a voice or an instinct that points us to something more than what we understand or imagine in our common sense, everyday lives. Sometimes those experiences become important markers for our lives. Other times, we simply move on and forget them.

The Gospel this Sunday points to one of those markers in the story of the church. It is reported in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. It is rich in biblical images from prior stories in the Bible when other believers had similar experiences.

We're told that Jesus took his closest disciples with him up on a high mountain, like where Moses and Elijah had encountered God before. For these three disciples, they have a vision so overpowering that we're told they were terrified. What they recalled later was an exceeding brightness that radiated from Jesus; and then two other figures (that the men somehow knew were Moses and Elijah), standing and talking with Jesus. For at least some period of time, the disciples were speechless. But then like he so often did, Peter finally spoke up and said something, even though he didn't know what to say (for me, I find that's usually a good time to remain silent).

In Matthew's version of this scene, the voice from heaven interrupts Peter in mid-sentence. The powerful message from heaven comes with echoes of the message Jesus heard at his baptism, "This is my beloved Son." But this time others have heard the message to the Beloved, too. And then the heavenly voice adds three words, "Listen to him." The vision comes to a sudden conclusion and the disciples are left alone with Jesus.

How are we to understand this story? Mark typically portrays a very human Jesus—a man who proclaims the kingdom of God with insight and miracles; but also as a real person with emotions and frustrations like one of us. But in describing this vision, something changes in how Mark reported about Jesus. It is like a curtain is pulled back and we're able to see a glimpse of reality beyond our common sense, every day world. And if we had been there with Peter, James and John, that glimpse would have terrified us, too. Why is that?

The brilliant light, the heavenly voice and the biblical heroes would be enough to get our attention. But beyond that, what if the vision reveals is true—what if life really is more than we imagine? What if how we live really makes a difference? How sobering is that? After his baptism, Jesus knew that and proclaimed the good news that the kingdom of God is near—life really is important. This vision on the mountain gave the disciples a chance to "get it," too; to see and understand reality like Jesus did. However, as the rest of the Gospel unfolds, even after this vision, the disciples still didn't seem to "get it."

For the church through history and for us today, this story is recorded and repeated so we may "get it," too. Yet as we hear it, there is a good chance that this can be just one more of those biblical stories we hear and wonder about and then move on as we return to our common sense, every day lives. That's understandable.

But still the church tells the story. We hear about Jesus' transfiguration every year on the Sunday before Lent begins. In a sense, Transfiguration serves with Easter as a bookend to the upcoming penitential season. Both serve to remind us, if we will pay attention, that "Earth's crammed with heaven," that life is more than we imagine. Our work during Lent is to repent and open our eyes to see that heavenly reality in our everyday lives.

How can we do that? Let me give you three ideas.

First, during this upcoming spring season, make it a Lenten resolution to take a walk at least once a week. During this walk, pay attention to what you see emerging. If you see a flower, bend down and look at it. Marvel at what God has created in nature. Give thanks to God for the grace that surrounds us that we too often speed by.

Second, during Lent, make it a point to really see and listen to people you meet. We may not have a vision like Peter, James and John did on the mountain; but if we really pay attention to people we meet and talk with, we may be changed. People are interesting—strangers, neighbors, colleagues, friends, your spouse, your children. They have a story to tell. And if we take time to listen, we may learn something and appreciate the grace of God present in the lives of people all around us.

Third, take to heart what the voice from heaven said to the disciples, “Listen to him.” Find a way to hear the words of Jesus on a regular basis during this season of repentance. Come to church. Read the coming week’s Gospel lesson in advance. Make a resolution to read through the Gospel according to Mark in one or two sittings. Or read some other passage from the Gospels, like the Sermon on the Mount. We may not have a supernatural vision of Jesus; but we can still “listen to him.” And if we do, his words can open our heart to God’s presence like a beautiful sunset or a “common bush afire with God.”

Regardless of what you do or don’t do this Lent, remember the purpose of the season—to make us aware of God’s gracious presence all around us so we can respond with worship of God and love of one another.

Amen.