

Are we paying Attention?

8th Sunday after the Epiphany

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Transfiguration of the Lord

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 99

2 Peter: 1: 16-2

Matthew 17: 1-9

One of the side effects of a seminary education is that whenever you hear a sermon, you think about the way you would have preached on that particular passage of Scripture. But as the season of Epiphany comes to an end each year, my prayer has always been “Thank God, I am not the preacher!” For 30 years, I have managed to avoid it. Well, the passage finally caught up with me. And so here we are on the last Sunday after the Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday, and I am standing in the pulpit.

While a thread of mystery weaves through this passage in Matthew, there is nothing very subtle in this account. Rather, the writer of Matthew has placed flashing lights all around these nine verses so that we pay particular attention to the Transfiguration and its implications for Jesus, for the disciples and for the faith community.

The story begins “Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain . . .” These are the first clues– The biblical number “six” and the mountain. The largely Jewish audience for whom Matthew is writing would immediately have heard the echo of the story we read this morning from Exodus: Moses also climbs to a mountain top – a holy place. And we are told that the cloud covered Moses for six days. Both Moses and Jesus have an encounter with the Holy Presence – and in case we missed the Old Testament references in this story, Moses – and Elijah- appear and converse with Jesus. We had best pay attention.

Our next set of clues; in both Exodus and Matthew, Moses and Jesus literally shine with the glory of the Holy. In both passages, the Holy Voice speaks from the covering cloud. Moses is told to bring the law to the people. In chapter five of Matthew, Jesus has already been identified as the fulfillment of

that law of love. The Holy Voice names Jesus “the Beloved” and commands the followers of Jesus to “listen to him.” These words are familiar too –we heard that same Holy Voice at Jesus’ baptism. We had best pay attention.

The placement of the Transfiguration story in Matthew’s Gospel further shouts “Pay attention!” Our Epiphany readings from Matthew have focused on two points which Pastor Steve has been reminding us of each week; “God loves you – and everybody else. Love God – and everybody else.” In recent weeks, we have listened to Jesus reframe and deepen the understanding of God’s law of love; love your enemies, resolve your conflicts with one another before you bring your gifts to the altar, and all of the “blesseds” that turn society’s values upside down and inside out. Living in God’s love, justice and mercy prevail. To “love God – and everybody else,” is to stand with the poor, the stranger, the forgotten, the lost, the lonely and the powerless. This is law of love that sends Jesus, Peter, James and John up the mountain. We had best pay attention.

Now that Matthew has made clear just how important this passage is, we are ready to wrestle with the Transfiguration itself – what does it mean for Jesus, for the few disciples gathered there – and most importantly, what does it mean for us right now?

Jesus knows what is coming. In the previous chapter of Matthew, Jesus begins “to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering . . . and be killed and on the third day be raised.” As with Moses and Elijah, Jesus and his message of God’s love, justice and mercy will be rejected. The same law of love that calls Jesus up the mountain will send him from the mountain through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus’ face that shines so brightly on the mountain top will be the same face that he will “turn toward Jerusalem” and the death and resurrection that waits for him there. In the verses that follow in this section of Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples, “So also the Son of Man is about to suffer.” This mountain moment is spring board to the crucifixion. We had best pay attention.

As usual, the disciples aren’t paying attention. In the midst of what is certainly an amazing spiritual experience, Peter wants to make it a permanent

reality and keep it close, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” How very human Peter is- he wants to hold on to the moment. He is awed by the loving light, but afraid of it too. His response to the experience is to keep it close, but he wants to contain it in dwellings where the Holy can be managed. Clearly delineated, Peter could find the Holy One when he needed a re-charge of his faith batteries without risking that he be brave enough to let the light transform him too. But the Holy One is having none of it – the Voice speaks, Moses and Elijah disappear and Peter and his companions are “overcome by fear.”

This just might be the reason I find this story so difficult. When God calls us to live more deeply into loving “God – and everybody else” – as individuals or a community of faith – it can be very frightening. We might be asked to change our way of life, to do something we never wanted to do, to go more deeply into the unexamined and wounded places in our lives. When we let God’s loving light penetrate the darkness, we risk being transformed into a life and a community outside of our control. It is much easier to tuck our faith inside boxes – or dwellings as the Scripture describes them – and visit from time to time.

But that is not what Jesus is asking his disciples to do – “Get up and do not be afraid.” And Peter and James and John get up and follow Jesus down the mountain to the death and resurrection waiting in Jerusalem. The love that Jesus embodies cannot be lived within neat boundaries; secure dwelling places are not home for those who follow Jesus. The cross shatters every boundary - the resurrection truth tell us even death cannot contain such a love. We had best pay attention.

Human beings like boundaries – and we have created so very many of them. Boundaries tell us who we are and who we are not -who is in and who is out – who is favored and who is not -who is worthy and who is not -who is loved and who is not. Boundaries divide the world, our country, our denomination and our own congregation. I don’t have to name the divisions –

we all live them. We hope they keep us safe – and we often prefer they keep us from crossing thresholds that lead to the pain, losses and injustices of those who do not share our “dwelling.”

As I have wrestled with the story of the Transfiguration for the past week or so, I am beginning to understand it as an invitation. The call to “get up and do not be afraid” is an opportunity we are given over and over again to live more deeply into a love that shatters boundaries and refuses to stay in the dwellings we prefer. Love calls us outside our comfortable dwellings - into the lives that are less privileged than ours.

There is nothing sentimental or touchy-feely about this kind of love, although a lot of times we wish it were. Public theologian and civil rights advocate Cornel West reminds us that “Justice is what love looks like in public.” Doing the work of justice is how we are transfigured by unlimited love. It is how we leave our dwelling places behind to join those who have none. It will bring us moments where love is so bright it bursts from us – moments like the joy of Dot’s announcement that the DMV is now making ids available to released prisoners, the look on Betsy’s face as she tells us how many letters have been sent to legislators in favor of criminal justice reform, Susan’s thanksgivings for her ministry in Africa. These are the mountain top moments. But is all the work before and following the mountain top moments that is the public face of the love that shatters boundaries. And as Jesus shows us, this love always comes at a cost. It involves our making a decision to “get up and not be afraid.” It calls us to turn our faces to Jerusalem – and to the hurting world around us. We had best pay attention.

Steven Charleston, the dean of my seminary is a retired Episcopal Bishop and an elder of the Choctaw nation who shares his daily meditations on Face Book. As I was putting this sermon together, Steven’s words came across my feed, “I hear that we are a divided culture, torn between many opposites, the haves and the have nots, the inner circle and the expendable fringe, the power brokers and the broken powerless. I am no politician to define these lines of privilege, but I am a stakeholder of justice. I can make my claim of

conscience. If we are divided, then I will stand over here. With those about to be sent away. With those cut out of the budget. With the ones waiting to be called on so they can ask for help. If we are divided, I will choose my side just as it has chosen me. No healing happens until the least of these are equal to the ones who have it all. If we are divided, I will stand over here.”

I was right that preaching on the last Sunday of Epiphany is a challenge. The Transfiguration is our invitation from Jesus to let love for God and for each other transform us. It is his call to leave the mountain behind and get into the messy, painful and hard work of doing justice. As Epiphany ends and Lent approaches, it is a clarion call to turn our shining faces toward Jerusalem no matter the cost. Are we paying attention?