

Last Sunday after Epiphany  
Year C  
Good Shepherd Berkeley  
February 14, 2010

Exodus 34:29-35  
Psalm 99  
2 Cor.  
Lk 9:28-36

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, an archeologist of some repute but also a fairly buttoned down Roman Catholic priest wrote one of the best guides to the Holy Land. When he gets to the part describing Mt. Tabor, about 10 miles from Nazareth in the northeast corner of the Jezreel Valley, where the church remembers the feast we celebrate today – the Transfiguration of Jesus – Fr. Murphy-O'Connor waxes eloquent. His unconscious, perhaps long repressed under the constraints of Irish Catholicism, just cannot be contained any longer. He writes: “The perfect breast shape of Mt. Tabor excites awe and wonder; it has the aura of a sacred mountain. From the dawn of history it was a place where humanity found contact with the unknown and it is hardly surprising that Christian tradition eventually located there, the transfiguration of Jesus.” (p. 301) And you know what? He’s right! Bless his celibate little heart! That mountain stands out all by itself on a fairly flat plain and it is indeed a lovely breast shape on the horizon of Mother Earth.

I stood on that mountain a year ago last December. It was the first stop on our pilgrimage in the Holy Land. And, given my experience there, I’m guessing it is one of those places that the Irish call “thin places,” where the border between the holy and the ordinary is most permeable. I love its feminine image. One can understand how the disciples might have beheld the glory of God in the person of Jesus, there on that holy mountain. My own experience of prayer, there, infused the whole pilgrimage.

It is in this context of prayer in which the Transfiguration happened, at least in Luke's gospel. He's the only one who notes that Jesus "went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." It is not surprising that Luke would locate this moment in the context of prayer. Many of the critical moments in Jesus' life occur, for Luke, around moments of prayer. Jesus was praying when he asked the question that led to Peter's confession of Jesus as the messiah and his first teaching about his coming death. This comes right before the story we read today. And earlier, at the beginning of his ministry, after his baptism, Luke says that while Jesus was in prayer he received the Holy Spirit and the voice of divine approval claimed Jesus as God's own beloved, a proclamation echoed again to the disciples as they enter the cloud of Transfiguration.

So today is the last Sunday of Epiphany season when each year we read a different gospel account of this Transfiguration story. In Eastern Orthodoxy the sense of cosmic renewal set in motion by Jesus' baptism on the First Sunday of Epiphany finds its culmination in the Transfiguration. Orthodoxy considers this one of twelve major feasts in the Church Year and "...commentators on the Transfiguration often point out that the light the apostles saw radiating from Jesus on the mountain was not simply present in Jesus himself, but in the eyes of those who beheld him... (And so for the Orthodox) the Transfiguration is also a feast that celebrates ...*our* increasing capacity to behold the divine light irradiating all creation. Thus" says the theologian Wendy Wright, "it is the vocation of all baptized Christians to become living icons, transparent windows through which the light of divine life pours." (WW *The Vigil* p 158)

What gets in the way of our becoming living icons of the light of transfiguration? How is it that Sunday after Sunday we come away from Eucharist, that most intimate form of prayer, not with shining faces but still wearing the furrowed brows of all our cares? Perhaps one reason the Lectionary tosses up this story for us to read at the end of Epiphany season every year is so we can spend the next season, Lent, seeking the answer to that question. What does get in the way of our becoming living icons of transfiguration? That image of the transfigured one is the icon of our own most true self, one we must learn by heart. Our quest for God, to know God more deeply, to be one with God, is about removing the obstacles to being who we are. Let us never forget that God became human so that we might become more like God, as Athanasius says. And so we reach for transfiguration.

I am part of a group of clergy and spiritual directors who meet weekly for prayer and reflection on lessons for the coming Sunday. And I always find in this group that the practice of communal meditation and reflection yields so much more than I discover on my own. For example, this past Thursday we were considering today's gospel story and I saw a turn of phrase in Luke's gospel that I'd read a hundred times before, but it struck me in a new way. Instead of concentrating on the usual aspects of the story – parallels to Moses' encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai that we get with the Exodus reading in the first lesson, or Luke telling us that this event occurred on the *eighth day* and its liturgical significance for the early Christians. And there's the mountain, Moses and Elijah representing the Law and the Prophets of the First Covenant, and the Light, and the cloud, and the voice, and the same words we hear at Jesus baptism – all that did not grab my attention. It was this little thing: "Now Peter and his companions were weighed

down with sleep; *but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory* and the two men who stood with him.” *Since they stayed awake, they saw his glory.* Shizam! Sleepy disciples, who for their efforts at resisting unconsciousness, are rewarded with a glimpse of God’s glory. I first thought about another time when these same disciples did *not* stay awake, in Gesthemene when Jesus prayed in agony that the cup of crucifixion might pass from him. But the second association was more personal. It came as I was praying in the group’s silence about this being my last Sunday at Good Shepherd. What popped into my head was a poem by the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Sufi poet, Rumi:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.  
Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.  
Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep.

It’s a poem for those sleepy disciples and it’s what they saw – “people going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch.”

But I also want to give it to you, my beloved good sheep. It is a poem for you and for me in our endings and in our new beginnings. It’s a poem urging our continuous striving to be living icons, transparent windows through which the light of divine life pours, as Wendy Wright says. “The door is round and open. Don’t go back to sleep.”

The round open door is the work we have done together these past two and a half years. It is the hard work of change and truth-telling and claiming identity, vocation, vision and mission. So, don't go back to sleep!

As I said in my report to the Annual Meeting two weeks ago, my charge to you going forward is to continually hold in front of you *your* identity as beloved of God. Keep listening for how God calls you into ministry now and in the future. Have a conscious and flexible vision of where this congregation is going. And finally, be clear about Good Shepherd's mission and how you will live into your identity, respond to God's dream for you and make real the intention God has for Good Shepherd. Be living icons, transparent windows through which the light of divine life pours out from your lives into a world dark with cynicism, and despair. Don't go back to sleep!

In Fra Angelico's 15<sup>th</sup> Century painting of the Transfiguration, a fresco found on a monk's cell wall in the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence, Jesus stands with his arms outstretched, cruciform shape, suggesting the exodus of which he spoke to Moses and Elijah, the exodus of his suffering and death "which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." Only Luke imagines the content of this conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Moses symbolizing the Law and Elijah symbolizing the prophets, testify to Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock says that "for Jesus, the experience not only gave heaven's confirmation of who he was but also confirmed that his passion was according to God's purpose revealed in the law and the prophets. The 'exodus' of Jesus would launch a new exodus for the people of God." Jesus death would set God's people free from slavery. It shows us

how to be those living icons, setting us free to answer violence and injustice with compassion and Jesus' own forgiveness and love.

I printed out an image of Fra Angelico's Transfiguration and pinned it to the wall beside my computer as I wrote this sermon because it so beautifully portrays the meaning of this story of mystery. And I've taped it here on the pulpit if anyone wants to look at it later. Muted colors, majestic Christ, adoring saints, fearful apostles. Often these frescos on the monastery walls by Fra Angelico have an egg behind the image of Christ. As an archetype the egg symbolizes hope and a new beginning. That's who Jesus is for the church, the painter is saying. That's who Jesus is for Good Shepherd, because always we begin again. In the memory of his Transfiguration may you and I find the glory of God in us, so that as we part from one another we might be even better living icons for having loved one another. Let us be for each other and for the world, transparent windows through which the light of divine life pours out in memory of the time we've shared together and hope for the future to come.