

Last Epiphany Year A

“Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in sight of the people of Israel”

Karl Barth, the great German theologian of the early twentieth century after having witnessed the expeditious and industrialized carnage of the First World War in which 16 million people were killed and 21 million were wounded....He could only say in his writing that God was “wholly other” ...that though the person of Jesus pointed the way to the nature of God, and to the hope of some future resurrection, alas God and Godhead were decidedly aloof from the world of men and men’s wars....His notion of God was one of a distant passively benign being (he called it radical transcendence) that could only be partially known in the person of Christ... despite the recurrent failings of those who attempted to discover an historical Jesus...Albert Schweitzer, one example,Barth’s theology birthed something of a neo-Deism in the twentieth century....a dark polarity between the God of love and sinful man...a dark polarity between the godly and the damned...much in the same vein as Augustine long before him....in the tradition of Calvin as well....that God is wholly outside of God’s creation, ultimately unknowable... in contact and in communion with only an enlightened or elected few.... perhaps....the world set loose by this ‘hard of hearing’ creator to its own devices....hard of hearing in that some prayers are answered by the deity and some not....and the only hope for us, if any, was Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the Cross.....but that was long ago....and the world in Barth’s eyes mostly seemed unredeemable....It is an age in which Yeats wrote his poem the *Second Coming* in which he describes the disintegration of civilization into a world of violence, prophetic to say the least....of Eliot’s *Wasteland* in which the poet paints images of hell on earth....Picasso’s *Guernica* that viscerally displays the horror of warfare.... Despite the so-called Jesus movements in the West and particularly in the U.S. over the twentieth century people have left organized religion in droves....People have lost interest in Barth’s God aloof in the heavens...the God’s the Greeks over two millennia ago called the unmoved mover....The church had to retreat, a hospital for sinners it became, hanging its hat on the super-nature of Jesus which further, ironically enough, separated him from us; Jesus who would deliver us from earthly travail into eternal life after death...a religion with relevancy only after death....Many wanted no more of that either.

In short theology went back in time, as it were, to the primitive God who must be appeased....a God quick to wrath and anger...the God who in the very beginning, according to Genesis, gave authority to the sun and the moon to rule the earth, aloof from the created order, while violence erupted all around the world until God had to destroy what God had made according to the myth....perhaps professor Barth expected as much in our own time....the wrath from the God of the mountaintops.

But while all this patriarchal modern and post-modern theologizing is going on, It is worth noting, that that is not the God of scriptureIn Genesis after the great flood God promises not to abandon God's people ever again...that God will never use violence to fight violence....and then God gets involved with God's people through the person of Moses and frees them from slavery in Egypt....and then after having met with Moses on Mt. Sinai some dozen times God descends from the mountain into the very camp of Israel....God carried as it were in the Ark of the Covenant...God in the midst of God's people to deliver them from the rigors of the desert and deliver them into a homeland....This is no disinterested God....if we take scripture seriously, in all of its mythy metaphor, which is not to discount scripture, but to empower it....metaphor that would beg incarnation and take her stand against the violence and injustice all around us.

And the story is told and retold throughout the sweep of scripture... and retold again in our gospel reading for today....that God will not be ensconced in the heavens...that God will not remain unmoved....God will be among us as a devouring fire...alive and about God's purposes in earth....this passage is clearly meant by the writer of Matthew to be a bookend to the story of Moses' encounter with God at Sinai....the narrative and the language of Matthew evokes in no uncertain terms the Exodus account of Moses' encounter with God while the people of Israel sojourned in the desert....so this is a retelling of the story of God coming among us... descending the holy mountain into the fray of living...coming among us as liberator from whatever it is that binds.

Matthew depicts Jesus as glowing...his person glowing and his clothing a dazzling white....and with him are Moses and Elijah...most likely symbols of the Law and the Prophets for Matthew....in other words...the whole of God's salvation history and future rests on this Jesus way... Matthew saying that this is the real deal....Jesus and those who follow, specifically here the baptized....Jesus is after all wearing the white of baptism, which any of the newly baptized in Matthew's time would wear at their baptisms.....and then just as suddenly as the vision appeared, Moses and Elijah are gone, and the ones left....the ones left to accompany Jesus

down the mountain are the three disciples... fisherfolk...the new keepers of the Law...the new prophets...ordinary folks like us...Jesus doesn't go to Jerusalem or any other place for that matter alone but is accompanied always and to this day by the faithful.

At its heart this is a story of incarnation...love enfleshed....love not wholly other...but love alive and among us...that it is for those of us who follow in this way (those of any faith who would serve the good)...those who would come down from the mountain of individual isolation, the mountain of self-interest and join the struggle as one who cares for their brother, who cares for their sister....It is for us dear people of God to be the devouring fire of love that will destroy the violence and injustice of our world....It is the fire of goodness...the fire of love that we bear....As Christ is transfigured...then we as the baptized...we, as people of conscience.... we too are transfigured...we aglow with God's goodness for our world...We are the ones who stand with the transfigured Christ now to effect God's will in the world....God's will being inclusion and embrace....mercy and compassion....God's will being that all are entitled to dignity... that all are entitled to live in a non-violent world....we dare not acquiesce to our ivory towers...aloof....we must go down into the humanity of our world, down into the fray, down to the margins, the desert places as did Moses as did the Christ....hard work that will require our all.

Our vocation is simple....It is our vocation to transfigure....It is ours to transform our world... It is ours to transfigure history, past, present and future...sometimes in acts of heroism, but most often in simple, mundane acts of love...acts of love which take on exponential proportions on the receiving end....Love transfigured.... transformed no less into leaven that is unvanquishable....

As we approach a Holy Lent....Let us seek our God who is alive among us...and let us seek what our God would have us do once down the mountain.... We the new law and the new prophets, aglow with the light of God....we, the law and the prophets which can be summed up in three words....**Love your neighbor**...Let us be that devouring fire, no longer a metaphor...Let us be the devouring fire, the very glory of the Lord...For the transformation of our world is at stake and our world waits in fragile hope... Let us with fiery passion love our neighbor...love our neighbor one step down the mountain at a time....for then they will know their God face to face.