

Last Epiphany Year C 2019

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany.... The season in the liturgical cycle of the church in which we speak of the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth; the revelation as to who this Jesus is. We began at the first Sunday after Christmas proposing in John's Gospel that Jesus is the divine Logos, the very embodiment of the truth; and in Luke Jesus has been described as the one to bear Mary's song of revolution; the one to bring about social and economic and political reversal. All heady theological speculation. On the last Sunday of Epiphany we read the account of Jesus' so-called transfiguration.... This story appears in Mark and Matthew as well. So we read this every year. This story, particularly in Luke is deliciously rich with typological images.... Images from the grand narrative of the Hebrew biblical tradition. Luke is being theologian here, of course, not historian... and for Luke this short account is the culmination as to Jesus' identity. As I hope you know by now, typology is the key to understanding these New Testament Gospel texts: That Jesus is nothing new, but a 'type' that appears and reappears throughout Israel's biblical history; like the suffering servant in Isaiah, like Elijah who raises the dead to life; like Moses who controls the waters of chaos. It is of utmost importance to the gospel writers, and perhaps most important to Luke that Jesus is connected to the tradition; in particular that he is in the line of the

prophets and patriarchs come before him. Jesus is not a new way, but a renewed way.

As I said, this passage is dripping with biblical imagery. Jesus ascends the mountain.... Just like Moses ascends the mountain in the Sinai desert... Jesus' face and his clothes we are told glow dazzling white.... Moses' face too is transfigured in the presence of God on Sinai. And if the hearer doesn't quite get the point, Luke has Jesus appear alongside Moses and Elijah, the two greatest figures of Israel's spiritual history.... This is the theological apex of Luke's gospel. Here in polemical style he declares that Jesus is the one, the type, like the great ones raised up in the tradition, to bring about the salvation of God's people. This is the one who speaks on behalf of God to whom we should listen. And Luke also manages to plug another of his principal themes here as well... He says this revelation occurs in the context of prayer... In other words revelation takes place in the context of paying attention, being watchful for the signs of the times. The disciples are described as weighed down with sleep.... For Luke that is the opposite of prayer, the torpor of complacency... and he says that the disciples keep awake enough to apprehend this vision of the Christ; and the disciples' response is that they want to stop and worship, build booths... institutionalize the experience.

Now this passage as one might expect has evoked no shortage of interpretations. It has kept many a biblical scholar off the streets at night. Some scholars say this is actually a displaced resurrection appearance, witnessed by the disciples; others say this is a foreshadowing of the resurrection to come after Jesus' trial and crucifixion. There is a hot debate as to whether this vision occurred on Mt. Hermon or Mt. Tabor. Still others say that this is a text that exemplifies Jesus' unique God-likeness.... But all of these musings, though interesting, I think miss the main point.

There is a line in this narrative that is easily overlooked. And in this line, verse 31, Luke amends Mark's account of the event. You remember Mark is the earliest of the Gospels, and Matthew and Luke are using Mark as their principal source. Mark describes Jesus on the mountain conversing with Moses and Elijah. And Matthew says the same. But here's the line in Luke: "Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." We use from Sunday to Sunday the NRSV translation. In the New Jerusalem translation, the Roman Catholic Bible the word for departure is 'passing'... big deal, right? But in the Greek the word for departure or passing is ἐφοδος... exodus... and that is a big deal. Exodus from slavery is at the heart of the spiritual consciousness of the

people of Israel. So typologically, at its heart, the Jesus movement is about liberation; and for Luke's audience that would be liberation from oppressive imperial occupation; as well as liberation from slavery (two thirds of the population in the ancient near east were slaves); and given the witness of Jesus' life and ministry it is also liberation from disease and shame and detention and incarceration and isolation.... It is liberation from hunger and thirst and poverty. The Jesus movement is about the freedom of our neighbor in which, in God's alchemical world, our own freedom lies waiting. Our freedom, our peace of mind, our dignity is intimately contingent to that of our neighbor, in particular our neighbor who is estranged from such freedom... Freedom that God intends for all of God's people.

The lectionary Gurus give us the option of omitting the healing of the demon possessed child. They are content for us to stop at Jesus aglow on the mountaintop.... But that would be to miss the force of this narrative.

Jesus doesn't belong institutionalized above the fray of human commerce, nor do we... to say that we as the church have no business with the affairs of the world is to ignore Luke's polemic. In that regard, I shall say it again.... The Jesus movement is intensely social, economic and political... Jesus must descend from

the mountain. And if you believe that Jesus for the gospel writers is the archetype of the true human; that he is us... we say that in our tradition, right? That the church is the raised body of Christ in the world? So if we are the Christ, the anointed, the transfigured of God, then we must descend the mountain of revelation, the mountain of our institutionalized faith... into the convulsed indignity of our world; we must descend into the world in which those who lack privilege, by no fault of their own, are mauled by the brute forces of abuse and isolation... Our call as the baptized is to set people free from sin... that is... free from the intractable structures of our world that would lord power over our brothers and sisters... and squeeze Love's life blood from them. There are those who say salvation is about going to heaven in the next life. I say salvation is about the freedom to live a dignified life in this one.

It is no wonder that the go to scripture of the black churches of the U.S. second only to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus... is the Exodus..., freedom from slavery and oppression... For those of us who are privileged, and that is certainly most of us Episcopalians, we are more at home talking about the poor in Spirit than talking about the poor. We all suffer. It is woven into the human condition; but to be without privilege, without power opens people up to suffering that many of us can't even imagine. Can you imagine having to talk to

your children about how to talk to the police to keep from getting shot? Can you imagine fleeing for your lives from violence and oppression, only to be separated from your family and incarcerated with no civil rights to speak of? In our privilege we are blessed with resources for encouragement and support in our suffering. We have medical care, and educational, and economic opportunity... but brothers and sisters there is a world out there that has none of that; a world just outside our beautiful red doors; and we have to make our descent, our own suffering notwithstanding.... We must descend from the mountain of our self-sufficiency into a world possessed by the demons of shame and dispossession.... It is for us to bring the transfiguring reality of God's Love to a world so very desperate for it. And the disproportional gap between privilege and powerlessness widens exponentially as we speak. Pay attention to the signs.

Like Jesus' disciples it is easy to fall asleep; easy to be complacent; easy to be complicit.... but we have to keep awake to that which God calls us: To seek and serve God's people transfigures our world; to persevere in resisting evil transfigures our world; to gather as God's people to remember in scripture and the breaking of bread who we are, transfigures our world; to live the Jesus movement in what we say and do transfigures our world; to work for peace and justice... and simply respecting the worth of our brother, and sister transfigures

our world. That is the pattern of Love; and Love is our call... and Love can't Love from the mountaintop. Love must be proximate. Love must come face to face with the demons of our world.... In the projects, in the prisons, in our schools, in the hospital, on the street, in the war zones, in our neighborhoods, in our family systems.

To know who Jesus is, is not enough. He is not a mere icon etched in stained glass. We must be Jesus down from the mountain into the created order, or disorder, as it were; and the modus operandi of creation is transfiguration... We live in a sacred process of transformation informed by the Love of God. It is for us to make God's dream real and alive through the gift of free will to choose Love instead of hate; to choose Love instead of indifference. Free will is not our undoing. It is our noble privilege. It is a noble privilege to choose Love.... And then to see and experience the beauty and the freedom of God's world... a world... transfigured.