

Sermon: Wake up to Love
Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year C
Luke 9:28-43a

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March 3, 2019

On Thursday when I was at the dentist's office, the hygienist asked me what I planned to do later that day. I told her I was going to be working on my sermon. She said, "Tell me how you decide what you are going to preach about." I told her I started with the lectionary, the readings assigned for the day, that I sat and prayed with them a while early in the week, and then listened throughout the week to what I heard in my daily encounters. I said, "it might include a conversation with you, or an article I have read, or a movie I've seen. Really anything I feel important to share." She then said, "You know what I wish you'd preach to your parishioners?" And I said, "What's that?" She said, "Tell them to floss every day!"

So, back to the lectionary! In our first reading we have Moses coming down from the mountain and in our Gospel reading we have Jesus and his friends going up the mountain and then back down again. I hope they had a good pair of hiking boots! Mountains are a traditional place where the faithful encounter God. Mountains, in their high elevation, seem a good place to pray, to listen, to begin to respond to God's call. And in both of these readings the men who are praying are aglow with God's bright and overpowering light. Moses' face is shining so brightly people are afraid to come near him.

Luke tells us, in a scene known as the Transfiguration, that while Jesus is praying, the appearance of his face changes and even his clothes become dazzling white. In this powerful and mysterious scene, Peter, James and John, the disciples accompanying Jesus, are learning to see and hear in a new way. They see something new in Jesus' transfigured, glowing face and they hear something new through God's voice.

"This is my son." Where have you heard those words before? Right! When Jesus was baptized. Only at that moment God is saying it to Jesus. "You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased." God is preparing him for mission. This time, in today's passage, God's voice is speaking to the disciples, speaking to us, the followers of Jesus. God is telling us this is the voice we are to listen to, this is the one whom we are to follow. And from last week's Gospel passage from Luke, this Jesus is telling us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, do to others as we would have them do to us. And not to judge others. At the heart of God's mission for us, we are to be like Jesus. We are to humbly grow in compassion toward all people, not just the ones we like or who are easy to love, but everyone. For in God's world everything is connected to the rest. There is no "us" and "them", only ... "us."

To think that we are truly separated from anyone or anything else is an illusion. And that kind of dualistic thinking is "the foundation of almost all the discontent and violence in the world."ⁱ If we realize that we are all made in God's image, and there is only "us" rather than "us" and "them", we can't help but treat people with compassion.

The transfiguration is a reminder that the kingdom of heaven is occurring right *now* in our midst. God's spirit is in each and every one of us *now*, if we can just be awake to it, if we can recognize or realize it. In that moment when Moses, who represents the Law, and Elijah, who is associated with the end times, appear to Jesus, both people who had lived on earth more than a thousand

years before, we see a confluence of past, present and future. This moment of clarity, oddly, comes in the midst of an overshadowing cloud. Isn't that often the way of God? To give us both clarity *and* uncertainty in a holy moment? This was a mystery to behold, not something easily explained, but inspiring great awe and wonder. Peter, James and John were weighed down with sleep when they got to the top of the mountain. But somehow they stayed awake this time, and as a result they witnessed Jesus' glory.

How many of us feel weighed down with life's worries, irritations and anxieties? How many of us are spiritually asleep? Maybe in some intellectual way, we say we believe in God, even come to church on Sundays, occasionally say a prayer during the week, but are still spiritually asleep? What if we considered that God's spirit is truly alive in us? And that God's aim is to reveal that Spirit within us so that we could more fully follow Jesus? What would that look like?

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a classic written by an English mystic in the 14th c., the anonymous writer says, "No one can fully comprehend the uncreated God with his knowledge; but each one, in a different way, can grasp him fully through love."ⁱⁱ As God's voice and Jesus' countenance highlight his divine nature, the disciples are told to LISTEN to him. This encounter clarifies Jesus' redemptive mission. The holy moment in the cloud, this glimpse of heaven, crystallizes that God's love is at the heart of all things.

The disciples leave the mountain not fully understanding what this glimpse of heaven would mean for them. And in fact, it appears they failed in their efforts to heal the boy with a demon. But Jesus, out of love, heals the boy. We, too, will fail at times, and we will need Jesus to do what we cannot do. But we can learn to love, learn to be compassionate. We can awaken to that Spirit within.

Lent begins this coming week on Ash Wednesday. This is a perfect time to think about our relationship with God, to take an honest look at our own spiritual practices that give us space to more fully experience the Living God within and around us and practice heaven now. Maybe you could ask yourself, what is interfering with my relationship with God? Better yet, what could bring joy to my relationship with God? Maybe pay attention to what you worry about and each time you find yourself worrying about something, big or small, giving it over to God. Perhaps you could pay attention to what or who irritates you, allowing God to smooth over your rough edges. What about increasing or beginning a new prayer life? What about noticing how you treat people, from the most powerful to the person who is living on the edge. Or notice how you spend your money, and if you are inclined to spend it all on yourself, consider giving some of it away to someone who needs it more than you? Think about your food and drink intake and adjusting them, maybe even fasting in some way, to help you remember your dependence on God and other people, just to stay alive. May all of your practices lead you to a place of humility and compassion.

Like Peter, James and John, may you allow God to overshadow you in the coming Lenten season, that you may be completely engulfed and wide awake to his persistent and profound love. Remember to floss your teeth every day. And may your life be transfigured so you may follow in Jesus' steps to bring light and compassion to the world.

ⁱ Rohr, Richard, *The Naked Now*, Crossroads Publishing Company, 2009, p.29.

ⁱⁱ Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. William Johnson, Image Books, 1973, p.28