

Sermon – Transfiguration of Jesus and Us

St Mary's Lake Ronkonkoma

In the movie “The Way,” that starred Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez, a father sets out to trace the footsteps of his son who has died in southern France and to find out what happened to him. His son left the United States on a quest to walk the Camino, the pilgrimage trail of St James that starts in the foothills of the Pyrenees and ends up at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Northwest Spain, the burial place of St James. The father collects the ashes of his son from the town at the foot of the Pyrenees and embarks on the walk. At first he struggles as he grieves for his son. As he continues, every now and then depositing his son's ashes on the trail, he meets fellow pilgrims who's issues at once repel him but also endear them to him. As each discovers more and more about the other they become bonded together and transformed by their experience.

Many people walk the Camino for different reasons but the primary reason is that they hope they will be transformed by the physical and spiritual experience and come closer to God. This is at the heart of all pilgrimages. You may remember a couple of years ago Bishop Larry and Jeanne walked the Camino. I intend to make this journey too at some stage in the future.

As Exodus people our Christian faith is rooted in times of pilgrimage, times of walking out of darkness and slavery, and into light and freedom. We are transformed by this experience. Our reading today from Exodus Chapter 34 is just a snippet of the larger journey of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. Moses led the people on this journey and at times it was difficult to meet their needs. They grumbled endlessly even to the point of wishing they could return to slavery where they perceived they had certainty and a better life.

We pick up the story after Moses had been called by God to the mountain top a second time. The first journey ended in an outburst of anger as Moses incensed at the people's worship of the golden calf, and their revelry, smashed the tablets at the foot of the mountain. In his second ascent God gave Moses the commandments again and made a covenant with him and with Israel, asking Moses to write the words of the covenant on the tablets of stone. Moses spent 40 days and nights in the presence of God on that mountain.

This wasn't the first encounter between God and Moses. God had been present to the people in the pillar of cloud and in the pillar of fire that led them each day and night. But this ascent was a time when Moses alone, representing a frail and sinful people, was brought into full communion with God.

Moses was transformed by his pilgrimage to the mountain top and his encounter with God. Moses came down that mountain radiating the very presence of God in his being. Radiating, rather than shining, is a word more closely aligned with the original Hebrew. Moses was radiant and this was reflected in his face, the part of our anatomy that conveys our deepest emotions.

Faces are amazing aren't they? It is the most important non-verbal channel of our emotions and is key in our social interactions. The facial muscles emanate from the facial nerve nucleus in the brain stem, which contains 7,000 – 10,000 nerve cells. The face is given a lot of space in the motor cortex of the brain, which is why we can make fine facial movements such as those used in speech. It is an amazing part of our creation and when we experience something deeply spiritual we can't help but radiate that feeling from our face. No other part of the body conveys the emotional, non-verbal response to our faith journey.

Moses' face radiated from his encounter with God. We also make statements about people's face being radiant. You may have said to someone "you look radiant today." For me radiance seems to come from an inner sense of peace, a sense of being at one with God, fully reconciled. It seems rare to come in contact with people that radiate an inner peace. It is more common to find people showing sadness on their face or anger and concern. When I shop at Wholefoods at Manhasset I'm amazed that everyone in the store seems sad or angry. No one seems to radiate happiness or contentment. I'm not sure if it's the shopping experience but it's the only place where I sense this on mass.

Moses radiance was such that he felt a need to veil his face to dampen the radiance. We read that Moses only unveiled his face in the presence of God. His radiance must have brought fear and intrigue to his people as they witnessed his transformation. The veil became a symbolic barrier for people between their own lives and the sure radiance of God. Moses' veil eventually became the veil in the temple that separated the people from the Holy of Holies, the tabernacle of God.

Through the coming of Jesus Christ into the world the veil between God and us has been lifted. Peter's testimony to the receivers of his letter explains that he was a witness to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a witness to God's declaration that "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," Peter offers us the assurance that Jesus came from God to restore us to full union with God. Peter witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus and carried the prophetic message out into his community reminding people to be attentive to the message "until the morning star rises in [our] hearts."

As we see and experience the Spirit of God radiating in ourselves and from others we see God's glory reflected back to us. In our ministry we should not lose heart. In our struggles we can experience glimpses of God's glory, and in those experiences, the transfiguration of our own lives.

Today is the feast of the Transfiguration when Jesus journeyed in pilgrimage with Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray. Jesus was at one with God in prayer and had been growing into a deeper awareness of God for some time. But this pilgrimage to the mountain top, in a similar vein to Moses, was to be an encounter with God that changed him forever, that transfigured him through God's glory. This was to herald in the end times. God spoke to Jesus in the median of a cloud as God spoke to Moses and declared that indeed "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him." Peter listened and after Jesus' death wrote to "those that have received the faith as precious as ours" telling them of this encounter.

As Jesus was in prayer we read that his face changed and his cloths became dazzling white. Jesus came into the very presence of God and with the great prophets Elijah and Moses, and this was reflected in his being and on his face. How wonderful, yet terrifying, it must have been for Peter, James and John, to witness this transfiguration. So much so the experience shocked them into silence. We can be thankful for their memory, testimony and witness that preserves this incredible experience for us today.

As we continue our spiritual journey through summer and fall, we might reflect on the pilgrimage of Moses and Jesus up mountains to their encounters with God. Our Christian lives of faith are indeed journeys, journeys that move us closer and closer to the living God. Our journey is fueled by reading of scripture, daily prayer practices, by serving others, by finding stillness with God in our busy lives, and in our communion with God and each other each Sunday as we feast at the Eucharistic meal.

Each of our pilgrimages takes different paths. Some may be lost and endlessly retracing their steps in the meadowlands at the foot of the mountain. Some may be in the foothills slowly meandering over the gentle slopes and some may be reaching the cloud line uncertain of what lies beyond. For others they may be in the clouds

hearing the Spirit of God and being transfigured in God's holy presence. As a community of people we seek to help each other move forward in the journey, to lift up those that have stumbled and to encourage one another along the way.

Each of us will be transfigured as we come closer to God, and although our transfiguration may be fleeting nevertheless our souls will radiate this state on our faces. Through our deeply personal journey toward transfiguration we can also encourage others to start, or to keep the faith to reach the goal. It's the spiritual radiance that shines from us that makes others want to know more, to know why we radiate.

Amen