

Sermon – March 3, 2019 – Last Sunday of Epiphany

Luke 9:28-36

Today is the last Sunday in Epiphany season. On Wednesday, we enter the season of Lent and it is traditional in Lent to reflect upon one's life and to take on disciplines to make us more receptive to the light and life of God, bestowed on us in Jesus Christ. To help with this intentional reflection we as a community of faith will be undertaking neighborhood prayer walks. Prayer walks are like mini-pilgrimages where the process of walking with an open heart helps God to reveal to us new insights into the community in which we live, minister and worship God.

It is fitting that the scripture set for today also contains a lot of walking, especially holy walking to encounter God. Holy walking is sacred to many faiths. You may have seen images of the Haj in Mecca or the Hindu pilgrim walks in India that date back to 1500 BCE. Most of these walks are mandated as part of fulfilling the requirements of the faith.

For Christians, pilgrimage is more optional but no less transformational. We are after all a people of the exodus. Journeying is a spiritual endeavor that draws us closer to God through the physical and spiritual nature of the journey. There are many well-known Christian pilgrimages around the world. People journey toward Canterbury Cathedral in England, or St Peter's in Rome, or to The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. And of course there are many pilgrimages to holy sites of healing and miracles, and to the resting places of the saints of the church.

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. 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 invited by God to the mountaintop a second time. The first journey ended in an outburst of anger by Moses. He smashed the tablets at the foot of the mountain incensed at his people's worship of the golden calf idol, and their revelry. In his second ascent, God gives Moses the commandments and makes a covenant with him and with Israel, asking Moses to write the words of the covenant on the tablets of stone.

This wasn't the first encounter between God and Moses. This ascent was a time when Moses alone, representing a frail and sinful people, was brought into full communion with God. This encounter anticipated the descent of God's glory to dwell in the tabernacle and the future temple, and ultimately in the whole created order.

Moses was transformed by his pilgrimage to the mountaintop and his encounter with God. He came down that mountain with the covenant promise, 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.

The radiance of God's divine glory in Moses was such that it frightened Aaron and the people. To spare his Moses felt a need to veil his face, to hide it from his people after giving them the commandments of the covenant. Moses only unveiled his face in the presence of God.

The veil became a barrier between people and God, which lasted for centuries. It was recreated in the temple as the curtain that separated the people from the Holy of Holies, the tabernacle of God's dwelling.

Our gospel reading today takes us to the Transfiguration of Jesus before God, and his friends Peter, James and John. As Jesus was in prayer we heard that his face changed and his cloths became dazzling white. Jesus came into the presence of God just like Moses. How wonderful, yet terrifying, it must have been for Peter, James and John, to witness this transfiguration.

The experience leads them to memorialize the event with an earthly shelter for the three prophets of God. However, in the end, it was their memory and testimony and witness that preserved this incredible experience for us today. Ironically, they did get their wish as chapels to Jesus, Moses and Elijah have been built on the mountain and pilgrims visit them every day. When I went last year the mountaintop was shrouded in mist.

Through the coming of Jesus Christ into the world the veil between God and us has been lifted. Paul writes to the Corinthians to show them that a greater glory now exists in Jesus Christ, and that the former glory revealed in Moses, and radiating from his face, has been surpassed. This new ministry of the Spirit is freedom. Paul reminds them that in Jesus the veil has been lifted, and in the resulting freedom we see God's glory more clearly.

At our baptism we become the temples of God's Holy Spirit and members of the body of Christ. Because Jesus has lifted the veil between God and us, God's radiance enters into our very being. We then radiate God's glory and see it reflected back to us, as we see and experience the Spirit of God radiating from others.

As we turn our faces collectively to the season of Lent and as we prepare ourselves for the Lenten journey and our neighborhood prayer walks, we might reflect on the pilgrimage of Moses and Jesus up mountains to their encounters with God. How will God be revealed to us in our walks?

Our Christian lives of faith are indeed journeys, journeys closer and closer to the living God. Our journey is fueled by our reading of scripture, our daily prayer practices, by serving others, by finding stillness in our busy lives to commune with God, and in our communion with God and each other each Sunday as we feast at the Eucharistic table.

Each of our pilgrimages takes different paths. Some may be lost and some may be endlessly retracing their steps in the meadowlands at the foot of the mountain. Some may be in the foothills 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 those that have stumbled and to encourage one another along the way.

We will each be transfigured as we come closer to God, and although our transfiguration may be fleeting, nevertheless it will radiate from our very being and on our faces. It is through this deeply personal journey toward transfiguration that we encourage others to start, or to keep the faith to reach the goal.

The freedom offered us through Jesus Christ involves active receptivity and mutuality, which are the heart of our faith in God. It's the spiritual radiance that shines from us that makes others want to know more, to know why we radiate.

The specific practices we take on, or build upon each Lent, help to make us more receptive to the light and the life of God bestowed on us in Jesus Christ.

I look forward to our Lenten journey and walking with you, both physically and spiritually during this holy season.

Amen